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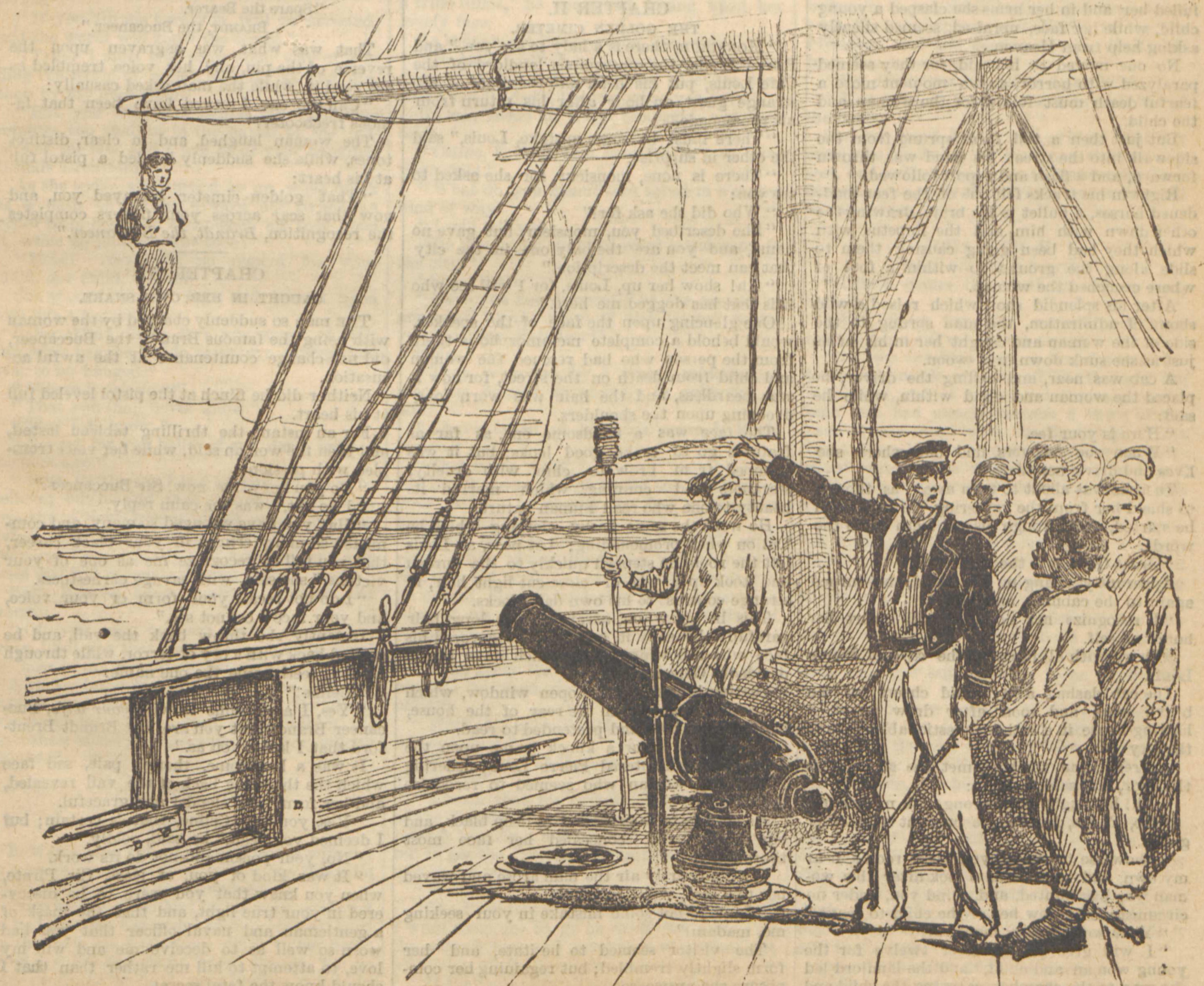
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THE FLOATING FEATHER; or, MERLE MONTE'S TREASURE ISLAND

A Companion Story to "Merle, the Middy," and
"The Midshipman Mutineer,"

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "MERLE, THE MIDDY," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"SHALL I CONFESS, MASTER?" ASKED MEZRAK. "NO! LET THE SECRET DIE WITH ME!" RUNG OUT THE CLEAR, FIRM VOICE OF MERLE.

The Floating Feather;

OR,
Merle Monte's Treasure Island.

A Companion Story to "Merle, the Middy,"
and "The Midshipman Mutineer."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MIDDY," "MIDSHIP-
MAN MUTINEER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE RECOGNITION.

A MAN was walking leisurely along one of the fashionable streets of New Orleans, glancing into the faces of the pretty women, and puffing the smoke of a fragrant cigar into the faces of the men, as though for his own sex he had an utter contempt.

He was tall, well-formed, and dressed so thoroughly like a dandy of the period, that many thought him one of the successful gamblers of the Crescent City, though no one seemed to recognize him.

He looked French, wore spectacles, and carried a cane in his well-gloved hand.

Presently there was a cry of alarm upon the street, and a general commotion.

The gentleman glanced in the direction of the confusion and beheld a runaway team dashing along at mad speed.

There arose a cry of horror, for right in the path of the flying steeds a woman had sunk down upon her knees, as though all power had failed her, and in her arms she clasped a young child, while her face, upraised, seemed silently asking help from Heaven.

No one moved to her aid, for they seemed paralyzed with horror, and a moment more a fearful death must follow for the woman and the child.

But just then a tall form sprung from the sidewalk into the street, his hand was thrown forward, and a flash and report followed.

Right in his tracks fell one of the fear-maddened horses, a bullet in his brain, drawing the other down with him, and the impetus with which they had been going causing them to slide along the ground to within a foot of where crouched the woman.

After his splendid shot, which raised a wild shout of admiration, the man sprung to the side of the woman and caught her in his arms just as she sunk down in a swoon.

A cab was near, and calling the driver, he placed the woman and child within, while he said:

"Here is your fee.

"When she recovers, find out where she lives and drive her there."

Then he was about to turn away, as though to shield her from the gathering throng, when he started, and through his set teeth came the words:

"Great God! it is the child."

Apparently changing his mind, he turned again to the cabman, and said:

"I recognize her now, so will escort her home myself."

"Drive with all haste to the *cafe* of Pierre Louis."

The cab dashed away amid cheers for the brave man, and soon after drew up at a lodging-house in a rather questionable part of the city.

A Frenchman, the host, met the stranger at the door, and said, quickly:

"Ah! has aught gone wrong with monsieur?"

"No, Pierre, but I have brought you other guests."

"Show me to one of your best rooms, near my own, and have madam look after this woman who has fainted, and, mind you, under no circumstances allow her or the child to leave."

"Your word is law, monsieur."

"I will give you number twelve for the young woman and child," and the landlord led the way to the chamber, carrying the child and

followed by his guest who bore in his arms the woman without a seeming effort. A sprightly little French woman met them at the door of the room, and, leaving the woman and child in her charge, the stranger returned to the street and resumed his walk.

Hardly had he gone half a dozen blocks when a woman, heavily veiled, passed him, started, hesitated, and then, as he appeared not to notice her, turned and followed him.

Entering a fashionable *cafe*, where there were many of both sexes taking refreshments, the stranger took a seat at an unoccupied table and called for a bottle of wine.

A moment after the veiled lady entered and took a seat near by, and from whence she could obtain a good view of the person, the meeting of whom seemed to affect her.

"Yes, I cannot be mistaken, for, though I could never penetrate his disguise, that pin has betrayed him," and her eyes were riveted upon a very massive gold pin that glittered in the stranger's shirt front.

"It was a miniature cimeter, the hilt studded with diamonds, rubies and emeralds.

"Yes, that little cimeter betrays him, for the form, the manner are his, and now I am on his track I'll not desert it until—"

She paused, and then seemed intent upon the refreshments she had ordered, though she but slightly put aside her veil to eat them.

When the stranger arose and left the *cafe*, she followed, and ten minutes after she saw him enter the place where he had taken the woman and child.

Then she turned and walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER II.

THE GOLDEN CIMETER.

"MONSIEUR, there is a lady to see you," and Pierre Louis, the obsequious landlord of the *Cafe Louis*, put his head into the room of his strange guest, an hour after his return from his promenade.

"There must be some mistake, Louis," said the other in surprise.

"There is none, monsieur, for she asked to see you:

"Who did she ask for?"

"She described you, monsieur, but gave no name, and you are the only one in the city that can meet the description."

"Ah! show her up, Louis, for I will see who it is that has dogged me here."

One glancing upon the face of the speaker, would behold a complete metamorphosis there from the person who had rescued the woman and child from death on the street, for now it was beardless, and the hair was worn long drooping upon the shoulders.

The face was a handsome one, as far as features go to make good looks; but it was stamped from brow to chin with cruelty, sternness and cunning, which marred its beauty to one who read human nature.

He wore the same flashy clothing which he had on when promenading; but now, as Louis left the room he stepped quickly to the bureau and took up a wig of close-cut light hair, in strange contrast to his own dark locks.

This he drew on, arranging his long hair carefully beneath it, and then he covered his face with a flowing beard, which gave him a decidedly German look.

Seating himself by the open window, which overlooked a garden in the rear of the house, he took up a book and pretended to read.

A moment after a knock came upon the door, and then entered Pierre Louis, ushering in the very woman who seemed to recognize the stranger.

As before she was dressed in deep black, and her heavy veil concealed her face most thoroughly.

With a courtly air the man arose and waved her to a seat, while he asked:

"Is there not some mistake in your seeking me, madam?"

The visitor seemed to hesitate, and her form slightly trembled; but regaining her composure she answered:

"I met you, sir, at the *Sans Souci Cafe* a short while since, and recognized in your shirt-bosom a pin that was either once my own, or its counterpart."

He slightly started, and eyed her fixedly, as though striving to pierce the veil to see the face beneath.

But he responded quietly:

"Ah, yes, this gem-hilted cimeter you refer to."

"Yes, sir."

"I obtained it a year or so ago, when in Havana."

"May I ask from whom, sir?"

"Certainly, madam."

"I was so fortunate as to save a gentleman, wholly unknown to me, from a parcel of cut-throats one night, and he forced upon me the acceptance of this pin."

"Do you recognize it?"

She looked disappointed, but answered:

"Yes, sir; but will you describe the person who gave it to you?"

"A man fully as large as myself, wearing a full black beard, and with hair cut close, while he was well dressed, and evidently a seaman."

She arose and approached nearer to him, while she asked:

"Does the pin bear no inscription upon the reverse side of the cimeter?"

"Yes, and that is what puzzles me."

"See here!"

He took the pin from his shirt as he spoke, and handed it to her.

Her hands trembled as she took it, and her eyes seemed fixed upon a scar across the fingers that held the pin.

"Spare the Bearer,

BRANDT, the Buccaneer."

That was what was engraved upon the reverse of the pin, and her voice trembled as she read it, while the man asked casually:

"Can the one I served have been that famous freebooter?"

The woman laughed, and in clear, distinct tones, while she suddenly leveled a pistol full at his heart:

"That golden cimeter betrayed you, and now that scar across your fingers completes the recognition, *Brandt, the Buccaneer*."

CHAPTER III.

CAUGHT IN HER OWN SNARE.

THE man so suddenly charged by the woman with being the famous *Brandt, the Buccaneer*, did not change countenance at the awful accusation.

Neither did he flinch at the pistol leveled full at his heart.

For an instant the thrilling tableau lasted, and then the woman said, while her voice trembled with passion:

"Do you know me now, Sir Buccaneer?"

"I do not," was the calm reply.

"Had you have wronged so many, and committed so many crimes in your black career, that you fail to recognize me as one of your victims," she said, with savage earnestness.

"I do not recall your form or your voice, and your face I cannot see."

Instantly she threw back the veil, and he started back with a cry of terror, while through his shut teeth came the one name:

"Celine!"

"Yes, I am Celine Edwin, your wife, Buccaneer *Brandt* that you are, but *Brandt Brentford* that I knew you as."

It was a handsome, though pale, sad face which the throwing back of the veil revealed, and her form was slender and graceful.

"Yes, you are Celine, that is certain; but I deemed you dead," he said, coldly.

"No, your poison did not do its work."

"It was kind of you, at least, Sir Pirate, when you knew that you were to be discovered in your true light, and that the mask of a gentleman and naval officer that you had worn so well as to deceive me and win my love, to attempt to kill me rather than that I should know the fatal secret."

"But I did not die, and lived to know that the one whom we had all trusted, and I had married, was a robber, and that he killed my aged father, robbed his home of his gold, and escaped to his vessel just in time to avoid the soldiers sent to take him."

"And more—that he left me, as he believed, dead by his hand."

"I poisoned you because I loved you, Celine, and would not that your ears should learn the secret of what I was," he said, with considerable sadness of tone.

"I believe that you loved me, Brandt Brentford; but oh, how cruelly you wronged me and mine; and it has turned the love I felt for you to gall, and I have longed to meet you that I might kill you, for I am revengeful, and I would avenge my wrongs and the death of my dear old father."

"I meant not to kill him, Celine, but when he discovered that there were robbers in the house, he rushed upon us, and I shot him in self-defense."

"His gold I did take, but I meant not to take his life."

"That alters not the act, sir, and now you shall die by my hand."

"Why, you do not intend to kill me, Celine?" he said, in a tone of indifference.

"I most certainly do, and now tell you that you have but a minute to live."

"Then you would make your child know that you were a murderer?"

She winced at this, and said:

"I would not do that, for I have kept from her the knowledge that her father was a pirate."

"If you kill me here you will be arrested, and the world will know the secret."

"True; I must seek some other way of riding the world of such a monster as you are, than by my own hand."

"But you shall not escape, for within five minutes you shall be in the hands of the officers of the law, and I will be at your hanging, Brandt Brentford."

As she spoke, she turned to go, when quick as a flash he sprung toward her, struck the pistol from her hand and placed his foot upon it, while he said in a low tone:

"Hold! Have you no regard for your child, our child, Celine?"

She was white with rage and turned upon him like a tigress.

"Our child! How dare you speak of her, and what has she to do with my giving you over to be hanged?"

"Where is she now?"

"That you shall never know."

"That I do know."

"No, no, for you believed me dead until a moment ago."

"True, for the spy I had on you led me so to believe; but he said that the child had been brought to New Orleans by its nurse, and was living here with a distant relative, and this very day I accidentally met Adelaide and our little girl and recognized them both."

"Oh Heaven have mercy!" groaned the woman.

"Oh, you may well ask mercy of Heaven, when I tell you that Adelaide and little Pearl are now in my power, as you are also."

A shriek burst from the lips of the unhappy woman and she sunk heavily to the floor, where she lay like one dead, while Brandt the Buccaneer stood gazing down upon her, wholly unmoved.

CHAPTER IV.

A MOTHER'S LOVE.

IT WAS a long time that the Pirate's wife lay in a swoon upon the floor, for not one thing did he do to restore her to consciousness.

Once he had loved her, in his way, and yet he had married her under false pretenses, kept up the sham for some years, going to her home from a pretended cruise after pirates, for he had professed to be a naval officer, when in reality he had been scouring the seas under his

black flag, and adding greater terror to his name.

When at last he knew that he was known in his true character, he had given poison to his loving wife, that she might never know the secret, and, after robbing her home, where she dwelt with her aged father, had taken that father's life and escaped to his boats, believing that he left her dead behind him.

Now he stood gazing upon her without seeming pity in his heart, and then walked to the window and sat there until she returned to consciousness.

In a bewildered way she glanced around the room, shuddered, as her eyes fell upon her buccaneer husband, and then, slowly rising to her feet, went over and knelt down before him, while she said:

"Brandt, you will not take my child from me?"

"The child and its nurse would have been dead but for me," he said coldly.

"How mean you, Brandt?" she asked, in a frightened kind of way.

He told her the story of the runaway, and, as he did so, took off his false beard and wig and tossed them aside.

She gazed at him, and, as though speaking to herself, said:

"The same handsome face that won my admiration and my love."

"Grown more stern, more sinister and cruel, yet still the same; but oh, how warped with crime is the heart."

"And you have changed but little, Celine, though you are sadder looking, and your form a trifle fuller," he remarked, gazing upon her lovely face.

As though not heeding him, she said:

"Brandt, I will forgive you all, if you restore to me my child, and swear to let the dead past bury its dead, become what you may."

He was silent for a few moments, and then said:

"Celine, I shall test how dearly you love your child."

"What do you mean?" she asked in a scared kind of way.

"I will tell you."

"Do you know aught of what is going on in the city?"

"Some little."

"Have you heard recently of the capture of my vessel by the crew of the United States vessel of war, Reindeer?"

"Yes."

"They were led by a young midshipman who has figured extensively in gallantry of late."

"I have heard of him; his name is Merle Monte."

"That is the youth."

"But it seems, though he led the attack upon your ship on to victory, he has gotten into trouble for mutiny."

"True, but it is from the envy of his superiors, above whose heads he was rising too rapidly; but be this as it may, he was driven to defend himself and that black Abyssinian slave of his, and the result was the killing of some seamen, and he is being tried as a mutineer, and will be hanged as such."

"I feel sorry for the youth, but what bearing has he upon your giving back to me my child?"

"Much, for upon his safety depends the life of your child."

"For the love of Heaven! what do you, can you mean?"

"I mean that his captain, Mayo Meredith, of the Reindeer, likes the boy immensely, and intends sending a midshipman on to Washington to get the President to pardon Merle Monte and his slave."

"Well?"

"The President may, and may not do it; but I want some one to go on with the middy on the same vessel, and returning with him, get possession of the dispatches sent back."

"If they are favorable to Merle Monte, well and good; if not, they must be made so, for

under no circumstances, Celine, must the boy or his slave die."

"What is your interest in this youth?"

"He knows a secret that I must find out, and doing so, I will enrich you and our child beyond your wildest expectation of riches."

"Brandt the Buccaneer, I would not touch your gold, nor should my child, if we were starving."

"No, no, no, for every dollar of it is red with human blood," and the woman's eyes flashed, and her lip curled, as she spoke with anger and scorn.

"As you please; but I love gold, no matter how gained, and being the one interested, wish to secure the treasure I seek through the boy."

"And I can aid you?"

"Yes, if you wish to save your child."

"With what do you threaten her?"

"If you refuse?"

"Yes."

"Death."

"Kill me instead."

"Ah, no; for I have half an idea you do not fear death."

"Well, what can I do?" said the woman, resignedly.

"You can save that boy, and by so doing save your child."

"Midshipman Merle Monte, you mean?"

"I do."

"How can I save him?"

"You were always good at disguises, and I know can handle firearms and swords with the skill of a man, so play a man's part, or woman's, as you think best, to get acquainted with the midshipman sent North to see the President, and the getting of the dispatches from him I leave to you."

"But I may not be able to do so."

"You must, if you have to take the life of the bearer."

She shuddered, but it was evident that her mind was made up to save her child at any cost, and well she knew that Brandt the Buccaneer never made idle threats, and was equal to any wrong.

CHAPTER V.

IN A PIRATE'S POWER.

"THERE comes the northern clipper now, captain."

"Yes, I see her; but we will not head toward her until we get the signal."

The two speakers were on board a trim little fishing-smack, cruising off the Delta of the Mississippi, and at a time when piracy on the high seas had almost become a thing of the past, if compared with the flaunting of the Black Flag half a century before, when merchant vessels were forced to go armed and well manned, to protect themselves from these rovers of the deep.

There was but one other person visible upon the smack, and that was a red-headed, freckled-face urchin of fifteen, who promptly answered to the name of Needles, when ordered to bring a spy-glass from the cabin.

Though evidently a fishing smack, the little vessel had none of the funny tribe on board, a circumstance which seemed to trouble her captain and crew but little, to judge from their faces.

The two men seemed to have passed the meridian of life, for their hair and beards were gray; but the one who had been addressed as captain, and held the tiller, possessed a splendid physique, and his eyes were yet bright and piercing.

Somehow he looked out of place there on the deck of that little smack, and his voice and manner were commanding, and had the ring of one born on the quarter deck.

"Yes it is the Reindeer, Adolpho, as I can distinctly see by my glass, and I would give much to be upon the deck of my cutter now," said the captain.

The other smiled, and answered:

"We could make short work of the clipper if we had the Sea Serpent beneath us; but I

hope it will not be long before we do stand on a deck, armed and well manned."

"It shall not be long, Adolpho— Ha! there is the signal."

The clipper ship, still half a league away, was now seen to be signaling to the smack, which after a short delay, intended by her commander, changed her course and put away on a tack that would bring her across the bows of the large vessel.

Under a good sailing breeze the smack glided along, until within hailing distance of the clipper, when a youthful ringing voice cried:

"Ahoy! the smack."

"Ay, ay," came the gruff reply.

"I have to return to the city, and the clipper cannot put back, so I will pay you well to carry half a dozen of us up the river."

"I must have good pay," was the reply in the same surly tone.

"You shall have it," answered the one who had hailed, and a few moments after those desiring to return to the city had been transferred to the deck of the little smack.

Among these were, first, a young man in the uniform of a midshipman of the American navy, and a slender, handsome youth, with a face that was sorrowful and rather effeminate.

Then came a youth of seventeen perhaps, dressed in a sailor's suit, and with iron manacles upon his ankles and wrists.

The face of this youth was white as marble, but stern and fearless, and so really beautiful in feature, that few would have believed him to be of the masculine sex.

His features were perfect, his hair a rich chestnut, hung upon his shoulders, and his eyes were dark, full of fire, when aroused, and yet as gentle as a dove's in repose.

His hands and feet were very small, and his form tall and slender, with great broad shoulders that denoted strength far beyond the average.

Behind this youth came a remarkable looking being.

It was an Abyssinian, with a body that denoted a giant's strength, and a head massive and almost tortured into hideous deformity.

Yet hideous though he was to look upon, to the careful observer, there was nobleness in his face, and he gazed upon the sailor youth with a look of intense affection.

Like the youth he too was in heavy irons, but unlike him in dress, he was attired in a Persian costume of the richest silks and laces, which looked oddly enough upon his strange form, and with a face so hideous and black.

Behind these two came four men in marine uniform, and evidently the guard of the two so heavily ironed.

Upon reaching the deck of the smack, the midshipman led his prisoners into the cabin, and ordering the marines forward took his place by the skipper of the little vessel, which at once held away toward the mouth of the Mississippi river, on its course back to New Orleans.

When a short distance divided the smack from the clipper, the skipper closed the companionway, so that his words would not be heard by those in the cabin, and said in a low tone:

"Well, Celine, you have done well."

"I have reddened my hands with human blood to serve you, Brandt, the Buccaneer," was the low reply in a voice that trembled.

"How so?" he asked indifferently.

"I was compelled to kill poor Midshipman Langley."

"Ah!"

"Yes, I went on with him in the clipper under the guise of a young girl returning to her friends in Boston, and though we became the best of friends, he would not betray to me a single secret."

"Upon returning, I disguised myself as a midshipman, assumed the name of a distant relative who holds that rank in the navy, and he knew me only as Roy Vernon, a brother officer: but still I could not get a chance to learn the nature of his dispatches, and becom-

ing wild with fright, for fear I might not find out, so as to save Merle Monte, and thus rescue my child from your vile power, one night in a storm I hurled him into the sea, and, Brandt Brentford, though God may forgive me the act, that deed will haunt me to my dying day.

"But I did it for my child's sake, mind you, and not because I was evil."

He took no notice of her grief and remorse, and asked:

"Then you got the dispatches?"

"My being here with the prisoner proves that."

"And what said the President?"

"He refused to pardon Midshipman Monte, and ordered him to be executed at once with his slave."

"But I changed the dispatches to an order for Midshipman Langley to bring the prisoner at once North, and, after sending you my letter, telling you to come in a fishing smack off the Delta, near where ships discharge their pilots, I got four men to aid me, dressed them up as marines, presented my altered dispatches to Captain Meredith of the Reindeer, making known to him poor Midshipman Langley's sad fate, who I said was washed overboard in a storm, and told him I had orders to bring Merle Monte to Washington with me."

"And he suspected nothing?"

"No."

"You have done well, Celine."

"And my child?" she asked eagerly.

"Is safe."

"And you will return her to me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"As soon as I decide to leave the city."

"Brandt Brentford, do you intend to break faith with me?" she asked in quivering tones.

"Ah no, Celine; but you are a most dangerous woman, as your tact in carrying out so successfully this enterprise, and the killing of Midshipman Langley, plainly show, so I will not put myself in your power."

"I will take you to your child, and when I leave New Orleans, you shall be free to go your way with her."

"But not before," and Brandt the Buccaneer smiled grimly, and once more threw open the companionway, while he glanced within the cabin with gloating pleasure at the two prisoners who were now wholly in his power, and the power of a merciless pirate.

CHAPTER VI.

SUSPENSE.

THE smack was held on her way to the city, and arrived there after a rapid run, for the little craft had been selected for her speed and sea-going qualities, as her pirate captain did not know but that he might have to depend upon both for his life.

True, he was thoroughly disguised, and no one would have ever believed him to be the elegantly-dressed gentleman who had rescued the nurse and young girl, the latter his own child, from beneath the feet of the runaway horses.

But he had a form that was not easily disguised, and during his long life of buccaneering he had become well known to many honest people, while there were numerous men, equally as wicked as himself, who, recognizing him, would be but too willing to gain a reward and pardon for themselves by betraying him.

Having accomplished his aim of getting possession of Merle Monte, the mutineer midshipman, and his slave Mezrak, it was the intention of Brandt the Buccaneer to wring from them a confession of where was the Treasure Island, with its vast riches, which the youth had inherited from his father, Montezuma the Merciless.

Knowing as he did the history of the youth, that he was the grandson of the famous Free Rover Freelance and the son of Montezuma, he knew well that the vast riches which they had possessed had gone ashore in a yacht one night on the Mexican coast, or on an island near it, and that the Abyssinian, Mezrak, had alone es-

aped with the little infant Merle, now the very one from whom he sought to force the secret of where the treasure which was his inheritance was then hidden away.

Dropping anchor some distance away from the shore, and leaving Adolpho, his lieutenant, and the boy Needles to guard the prisoners, Brandt rowed ashore, accompanied by Celine, his wife, in her natural garb, for she had discarded the uniform of the pretended midshipman, Roy Vernon, shortly after arriving on board the smack.

The men she had with her were some of the buccaneer's own crew, who, upon receiving her letter asking for four seamen to act as marines, had sent them to her in full uniform—so they went to the rendezvous, which was at the *cafe* of Pierre Louis.

Celine accompanied the chief to his room, and Pierre Louis was at once sent for.

"What will monsieur wish?" asked the Frenchman.

"The woman and child I left in your keeping are safe?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You see this lady?"

"I do, monsieur."

"When she comes to you, mind you, after my departure from the city, lead her to the woman and child and allow them to depart with her."

"How shall Pierre know if monsieur is gone, for he is here to day and gone to-morrow?"

"When I tell you adieu, then I shall be on my way to my vessel, and not before."

"I understand, monsieur."

"Now, madam," and the buccaneer turned to the poor mother, who had listened breathlessly to all that had passed.

"Now you can depart, but I advise you to call upon Monsieur Louis each day to ask if I have gone."

"I bid you farewell, madam, and should poverty overtake you, or you desire to communicate with me, Monsieur Louis can arrange it for you."

He stepped to the door, held it open, and without a word she departed in dread suspense, for though she had heard the order to Pierre Louis, and had accomplished the work she had undertaken, she yet feared that the pirate might deceive her and keep the child in his power, for well she knew how he had seemed to love it, when she had believed him to be all that was good and noble.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BUCCANEER'S PLOT.

"Now, Monsieur Louis," said Brandt, as soon as Celine had left the room, and the Frenchman had returned after showing her out of the *cafe*, "what is to be done?"

"How do you mean, captain?" asked the man, dropping at once his accent and French manner, and speaking in his natural voice and perfect English.

"By the god of the sea! but you startled me, Louis, for I had so long looked upon you as the man you pretend to be, that the change in your voice gave me a shock," laughed the pirate.

"To you, who know me, Captain Brandt, I am as in the olden time, Louis Long, your old boatswain; but to others I am Pierre Louis, a French *restaurateur*, and the impersonation has saved my neck, for were I recognized, as you are aware, captain, my life would end on the gallows."

"Yes, and I would lose a good friend; but now, Louis, I want your aid."

"Willingly, Captain Brandt."

"Sh—the walls have ears, so speak not that name too loud, Louis."

"Not my walls, captain, for it costs a life if a secret leaks out of my house," said the man, significantly.

"I believe you, Louis."

"But let me tell you that I intend to retake my cutter, which was taken from me a short while since."

"It is like you, captain."

"She is a good craft, fleet as the wind, and I shall need her for a purpose I have on hand, which if I am successful in, you will not have to keep a restaurant any longer."

"Thank you, captain."

"Don't thank me yet, Louis, though I feel hopeful of success; but I need your aid."

"What can I do, captain?"

"Disguise yourself as a cake and pie peddler, and go on board the cutter, and find out just how many officers and crew there are in charge of her, and what she needs to fit her out for a cruise."

"That I can easily do, captain."

"Then I want every good man you can lay your hands on."

"I can get you three-score within twenty-four hours."

"I want good men this time, for Max Maurice, my former lieutenant, brought on board a set that were afraid of close quarters, and we lost the cutter thereby, he lost his life, and I barely escaped by jumping overboard into the lagoon and swimming ashore."

"This time I want only men who are willing to follow my lead, go where I will."

"Just such men I will get you, captain."

"I shall need about seventy, which, with my own crew, will make about a hundred."

"A large number."

"True, but I may have to fight a heavily-manned vessel, and I do not wish to be caught short of men, for with that number, well trained and perfect devils, I could board and take a frigate."

"I know well what you can do, captain, and just the men you need, and I will put my agent at once to work collecting them, and, as I said get them for you within twenty-four hours."

"Do so, for the sooner the better, and have them ready to move at a moment's notice."

"I will have them at several *cafes* on the river front, captain, and they can be ready to start on a minute's notice."

"And arm them, Louis, for here is gold, or at least what will get it," and the chief threw a large diamond upon the table.

"That is a fine stone, captain, and will bring gold enough to equip a small craft," said Louis, looking at the gem with critical eyes.

"Keep for yourself what you do not use, only do not disappoint me."

"I will not, captain; but may I ask what cruise you will make, for, as the seas have been swept of nearly every black flag, you will have hosts of cruisers after you."

"True, but my intention on this cruise was to go after a buried treasure, and if I get it, I shall bid farewell to the sea, and live like a prince on shore."

"If you do not get it, captain?"

"Then I shall be a trifle reckless, Louis, and I'll still keep the black flag flying from mast-head and peak, and the name of Brandt, the Buccaneer, shall go down in history as a man who knew no mercy to man or woman," and the pirate chief spoke with a ferocity that proved to his hearer that he would keep his word.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEEDLES, THE BOY PIRATE.

"WELL, Mezrak, we are hardly any better off here than we would be in the hands of the marines of the Reindeer," said Merle Monte, addressing his Abyssinian slave, Mezrak, when the two were left alone in the cabin of the smack, after its arrival in New Orleans.

"My master, there we were to die, and we would have made no effort to escape; but here, though we are to die, for I know that our foe cannot wring from us the secret he would know and will kill us, we at least have a chance in our favor," answered Mezrak, speaking in the Persian tongue, and in the slow, dignified manner habitual to him.

"And what is that chance in our favor, good Mezrak?" asked Merle Monte.

"It is, master, that we are alive."

"Oh, yes, while there is life there is hope;

but we have thwarted Brandt, the Buccaneer, so often before that he will be pretty certain this time not to allow us to escape."

"He will if he can, master."

"And we will escape if we can, Mezrak, and I shall watch my opportunity to do so, for, though I was tried by my brother officers and found guilty of mutiny, according to the laws, I yet, in my own conscience, feel that it was forced upon me by Lieutenant Graham and Midshipman Martin.

"Publicly they denounced me, Mezrak, as a mutineer—ay, and far worse, as the son of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and I know they formed a plot to ruin me; but, so help me High Heaven! if it be in my power to escape, these two men—ay, and Heber Menken, too, who joined with them, shall rue the day they were born, and yet answer to me for the wrong they have done me."

"My master is right, for he should have revenge," said the faithful Mezrak, and, had any of the officers who, from envy and malice, wrought the ruin of Merle Monte, seen the face of the Abyssinian as he spoke, calmly though the words were said, they would have trembled with dread.

Having decided that they must in some way escape, Merle Monte and Mezrak discussed that way until the night had grown old, and then they sought rest.

But several days passed away, and ironed as they were to the floor of the smack's cabin, and guarded by the pirate lieutenant and Needles, they had not the slightest opportunity to escape.

They were well fed, had good beds, by the captain's orders, Lieutenant Adolpho said, but their irons were never removed, and though the young officer—for he was a young man, though disguised as an old one—was frequently out of their sight, the indefatigable Needles seemed never to be.

Sometimes the boy was wont to lay down upon the deck to take an afternoon nap, but let a chain clank, and one of his knowing eyes was at once opened and fixed upon the prisoners.

At night Needles slept in the cabin on the floor; but did either Merle or Mezrak move, he was awake at once.

"Say, my boy, your sleep does you little good," said Merle to him one day, when a movement of his, ever so slight, awakened Needles from what appeared to be very sound slumber.

"Oh, I get plenty of sleep," said the boy.

"When?"

"All the time, for I sleep whenever I am not eating, and eat when I am not sleeping."

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you manage to keep a close eye on us all the time."

"That's the work I do."

"I can give you work that can pay you better."

"Don't know as you can."

"Yes, for I don't think you get much pay here, other than hard knocks and crusts."

"Yes, I do, for I steal what I want to eat, and nobody dares strike me," and there was that in the boy's look that proved he would be dangerous if aroused.

"Why, what would you do if any one struck you?"

"Knife 'em."

"Kill them?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Needles."

"Is that all the name you have?"

"It is the only one I own since I took to pirating."

"What made you join a gang of pirates?"

"I have an old mother to look after, and I shipped on board what I thought was an honest craft, but it turned out to be a pirate, and, as I could support the old lady in greater comfort, and she didn't know the difference, I just stuck to the black flag."

"But this is very wrong."

"I know that."

"Why do you not leave off your evil life, then?"

"Oh, I shall some day."

"You may leave it off at the end of a rope."

"I may, but I doubt it; but I'll stick to piracy until I get enough laid by to give the old lady a snug little home and enough to live on."

Merle glanced at Mezrak, who returned his look, and then he said in a low tone:

"Needles, though in irons, and a condemned mutineer, I am not poor by any means, and if you will aid my slave and myself to escape, as I know you can do, I will give you a fortune for your mother."

Needles drew himself up to his full height and said, sternly:

"Shipmate, I feel sorry for you, and for that black nigger; but if I am a pirate I am honest and don't betray those who trust me."

"I was told to guard you, and I'll do it if you offer me ten fortunes."

"Now don't try to bribe Needles, the Boy Pirate, any more," and, turning on his heel, the strange youth left the cabin.

CHAPTER IX.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

"WELL, Merle Monte, you were not able to bribe my Boy Pirate into releasing you, it seems?" and, as the words fell upon his ear, Merle looked up to behold before him a man in priestly garb.

He looked the holy padre most thoroughly, but Merle knew it was none other than Brandt, the Buccaneer, even had not his words, upon entering the cabin, betrayed him as such.

"Yes, it was my desire to escape by any means in my power," was Merle's quiet response.

"You cannot escape me, for I owe to you the capture of my cutter in the lagoon some time ago."

"You fought well, Senor Monte, and, had you remained in the navy, you would have risen to high rank."

"Fate was against me, though," and Merle smiled sadly.

"Fate and myself, sir; but you yet have a chance to live a joyous life."

"With the brand of a mutineer upon me," answered Merle, with sarcasm.

"Bah! what need to care for that?"

"But I do care, for that is a stain upon me I can never erase, though I do not feel guilty of any crime other than protecting my life and that of my faithful slave when set upon."

"Then why mourn over it, when you can, in a foreign land, and under another name, be unrecognized and forgotten?"

"Yes, your wealth can buy you friends innumerable."

"I seek no advice from Captain Brandt, the Buccaneer," answered Merle, sternly.

"But I shall offer it, as if you follow it, it results to my benefit."

"In what way?"

"You are possessed of a valuable secret."

"What secret?"

"You are the heir of Montezuma the Merciless?"

"Well?"

"He secured the treasures of his pirate father, Freelance, the Buccaneer, and then, by marrying an heiress, got other vast wealth, while, by returning to the land of his mother, who was a Persian Princess, he got a third immense fortune in precious stones, gold and silver."

The pirate paused, as though to mark the effect of his words upon Merle.

But the face of the youth was as impassable as marble.

Then Brandt, the Buccaneer, continued:

"Disturbances in Persia caused your father, Montezuma, and his wife to leave that land."

"They departed in a large yacht, with a good crew and a few faithful servants, one of whom stands there," and he pointed to Mezrak.

"In the yacht's hold were the vast rich-

wealth far more than a king possesses, and with this your father intended to live like a prince in America or Mexico, where once before he had startled the land with his fabulous wealth and generosity.

"But an envious Persian prince sent a vessel-of-war after your father, a battle followed, and in it four important events happened.

"Am I right, Senor Monte?"

"I have nothing to say, sir," responded Merle, calmly.

"Those four events were: First, the yacht of your father beat off the vessel-of-war.

"Second, you were born in the midst of storm and battle, making you a true child of the sea, Senor Merle.

"Third, your mother died in giving you birth.

"Fourth, your father died from wounds received in battle.

"But his death and that of your mother were kept secret for awhile, and being discovered at last, mutiny followed, and strange to say that slave and two others, one of whom was a woman, remained in control of the yacht.

"I was boatswain then on the vessel, and I was put ashore by the faithful slaves of Montezuma, and the yacht went ashore on some island or part of the coast, where I have reason to know the treasure is now hidden.

"Near that hidden treasure these slaves reared you, Merle Monte, and from there you launched forth to make a name for yourself, and win a midshipman's berth in the navy of the United States by capturing my vessel on the Mexican coast.

"I have dogged you since then faithfully, for if I could get you into my power, I knew my fortune was made; but you not only escaped me on numerous occasions, but have thwarted me many times, and again, only a short while since, captured my second vessel, the Sea Serpent, for, had you not led that first boat, I would have beaten off my foes and gotten the cutter to sea.

"Again I have you in my power, and now there is but one chance of escape for you, and unless you do as I command, you and that black imp shall die by the most fearful torture I can put you to."

The chief was now livid with rage, for he had worked himself up into a fearful passion, but Merle was as calm as a mill-pond, and glancing at Mezrak, said, lightly:

"We are in for it, Mezrak."

"Yes, master, the pirate is very angry," returned the slave, without showing the slightest fear of the terrible fate they had been threatened with.

CHAPTER X.

ON BOARD THE SEA WOLF.

IN the commodious and luxuriously furnished cabin of the American vessel-of-war Sea Wolf, anchored in the Mississippi river, off New Orleans at the time of the incidents related in the foregoing chapters, sat a handsome man who had not yet reached the meridian of life.

He was glancing over some papers upon the desk before him, and his brow was clouded, as though he found in their contents nothing of a cheerful nature.

His face was noble and resolute, and there was a kindly look in his eyes which did not belie his nature, for Captain Mayo Meredith was known as one of the most daring officers in the service, as fine a sailor as ever trod a deck and a true man to his crew.

"Ah me! I would have given my right arm to have saved the boy, and now only wish that I had gone on to Washington myself to see the President, instead of sending that poor midshipman who lost his life.

"I think I could have convinced the President that the boy was driven simply to protect himself, as I feel confident he has risen too rapidly to have a single friend on board this vessel.

"Why is it that a man who has not the

nerve to rise above his fellows surely hates one who does?

"What is it, my boy?"

"A person to see you, sir."

"Who is it, for if not an important visitor, I care not to see him."

"It is Mr. Belden, sir," answered the cabin boy who had announced the visitor.

"The old gentleman, sir, who brought you the news that the pirate cutter was in the lagoon."

"Ah yes, his name had escaped me.

"Admit him."

A moment after a man of slender form, and slightly under the medium height, entered the cabin.

He was a man who had seen half a hundred years, perhaps, to judge from his appearance; but he was well-dressed, gentlemanly in manner, and bowed low as he entered the Sea Wolf's cabin.

"Be seated, Mr. Belden, and I am glad you called on me, for I failed to ask you to return to the Sea Wolf with me, after the capture of the pirate, and asking for you, found that you had returned to the city on the cutter."

"Yes, sir, I preferred to remain on the captured pirate craft, for I did not know but what Buccaneer Brandt had some secret hiding-place about his cabin which I might be able to ferret out."

"And did you?"

"I did not, sir, as the exciting scenes which followed, after we lost sight of the Sea Wolf, prevented."

"You refer to the mutiny?"

"Captain Meredith, I refer to the inhuman treatment, by Lieutenant Graham and Midshipman Ross, of Merle Monte and his slave," said the old man sternly.

"This is strong language, Mr. Belden, to me against officers of the navy."

"It is not half what they deserve, sir."

"Have you proof of what you say, sir?"

"My own word, Captain Meredith only."

The captain shook his head slightly, and asked:

"Why did you not appear at the court-martial in favor of Monte?"

"I intended to do so, sir, but I got a clew that I thought would lead me to the retreat of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and in following it, unfortunately forgot the poor youth."

"Did you find any clew to the whereabouts of the pirate chief?"

"I found I was following a false scent, so returned to New Orleans to learn with deep regret that Merle Monte had been tried, sentenced and sent to Washington to be executed as a mutineer."

"Alas, yes; but what could be done?"

"Learn the facts."

"What facts did the court-martial not learn?"

"Facts which I can tell you."

"I will gladly hear them, sir, and if there is the slightest chance to save that youth, I will dispatch the cutter North at once in an endeavor to do so, by getting him a new trial."

"Well, Captain Meredith, I overheard a plot between Lieutenant Dunning Graham and Midshipman Paul Martin, to get rid of Merle Monte in some way before reaching the city."

"Mr. Belden, you astound me."

"I tell the truth, sir."

"Both of them were jealous of the brave boy, and they sought his destruction or disgrace."

"The plan worked but too well, for they commenced with an attack upon the slave, Mezrak, and I heard Paul Martin say that he knew that Merle would protect the black, trouble would follow, and bloodshed and perhaps death would be the result, all of which would come under the head of mutiny."

"Mr. Belden, you heard this?" asked Captain Meredith, in a low, earnest tone.

"I did, sir."

"You are willing to take oath to it?"

"I am, Captain Meredith."

"Pardon me, Mr. Belden, but you are un-

known to me, other than through your coming and reporting to me the presence of the pirate craft in the lagoons below.

"You piloted the vessel then, and all turned out as you said, while Monte and others spoke of your distinguished daring in the boat attack upon Brandt."

"More than this I do not know of you, so pardon me, I again ask, if I beg you for proof of what you tell me against two of my officers?"

"What proof would you have, sir?"

"I would know that you are one whom I can fully trust."

"Surely some one in the city must know you, and if they give you the credit of being a man of honor, I will act in the matter against Graham and Martin."

"I will tell you, Captain Meredith, who and what I am, and you can judge if I am to be believed," was the quiet response of the old man.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERIOUS OLD MAN.

THERE was something about the old man that Captain Meredith could not fathom.

He had an air of gentleness about him that seemed natural, and was very winning, while it was evident that he had seen much of life, and had to face its ups and downs continually.

In answer to his visitor's remark that he would tell him who and what he was, the naval officer said:

"I shall be glad to know, sir, if that you care to tell me regarding yourself, and feel that you would not make an assertion idly."

"I would not, sir; but what I make known to you must be held in the strictest confidence."

"You ask this, do you, sir?"

"I must go so far as to demand it, Captain Meredith."

"Then I will so receive what you have to say, sir."

"Thank you, Captain Meredith, and I feel that your word is all I need ask."

"To begin with, let me ask you if you remember a youth who shipped on board the Sea Wolf when you were in Havana some months ago?"

"Yes; a handsome lad with sorrowful eyes and a waist so small that the men called him Little Belt."

"That is the lad, sir."

"May I ask if he is with you now?"

"He is not."

"Where did he leave the ship, sir?"

"He left the Sea Wolf, Mr. Belden, at the time of the capture of Brandt's schooner, Scorpion, on the Mexican coast."

"Merle Monte captured the craft and surrendered her to me, and I sent him in her as junior officer to Washington, knowing he would get a middy's warrant, which he did."

"As Little Belt begged to go, I allowed him to do so, and since then I have not seen him, and regret to say that I have nothing good to communicate regarding him."

"Indeed! did he turn out badly?"

"He was a pirate, sir, in disguise, and one of Brandt's own crew."

"Impossible, sir!"

"It is true, for when the pirate chief reached Washington, the officer in command went on shore one evening, leaving a midshipman in charge, for Merle Monte had gotten his papers as a middy, and had left at once with dispatches to join me."

"Well, some time after the lieutenant had gone ashore, a boat came off, and in it was Little Belt."

"He handed to the midshipman a letter, which he said was from the lieutenant, and it proved to be an order to send the prisoner, Brandt, the Buccaneer, to the prison on shore."

"An officer, or a pretended one, with marines, was along, and without the slightest suspicion of wrong the midshipman allowed the pirate chief to depart, and to his horror heard

the next morning that the letter from the lieutenant was a forgery and that the pretended marines were allies of the pirate, all under the control of that scheming Little Belt.

"But I am doing the talking where I expected to be the listener."

"I am glad to know, Captain Meredith, your exact report of Little Belt's participation in the escape of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and now will proceed to explain in part his motives."

"You know his motives, then?"

"I do."

"Then he was the pirate's ally?"

"No, he was not."

"Still he saved him from the gallows."

"True, but for a purpose."

"And that purpose?"

"To hang him."

"You speak in enigmas, Mr. Belden."

"I will be more explicit, Captain Meredith."

"Pray do," said Captain Meredith, coldly.

"Did you ever feel revengeful, sir?" suddenly asked his visitor.

The captain flushed slightly, and as his thoughts went back to one who had by treachery and falsehood stolen from him the love of a fair girl who had been all the world to him, he said sternly in answer:

"I must confess that I have felt revengeful in my life, sir."

"Then you can appreciate it, when I say that Little Belt acted from revenge."

"Had he left the chief alone his revenge would very soon have been gratified by seeing him die upon the gallows."

"Not so, sir, for Little Belt wanted a revenge far superior to that."

"I cannot comprehend what could be a greater revenge."

"The fact, Captain Meredith, of having himself brought him to the gallows."

"Ah!" said the captain, fully convinced that this indeed was the very acme of revenge.

"True, sir, and that is why he aided his escape, to have him brought to his bitter end by his hand."

"He must hate the pirate indeed."

"He does, fully as much as I do."

"He had been wronged by him then?"

"Bitterly, cruelly, Captain Meredith."

The boy had lived on the Gulf shores with his mother and sister, the latter an innocent, trusting girl.

"One day the boy and sister, in their little boat, had been caught in a blow, their craft was dismantled, and the storm blew them off the coast.

"Death by starvation would have followed had not an armed vessel sighted them and picked them up."

"For days the sister lay ill, but the captain of the vessel nursed her back to life, and then ran down to the home of the youth and maiden and took them back to their mother, who had given them up for lost."

"The officer was overwhelmed with thanks, and bidden to make that place his home forever."

"He represented himself as an officer of the Columbian Navy, was a fascinating man, with polished, winning manners, and won the heart of the maiden."

"Some months after, when his vessel again touched at the little port, the young girl was urged to become his wife and consented."

"The ceremony took place on board the cruiser, and was performed by a priest in full robes, and the young bride went off on a bridal cruise with her husband."

"But she had not been long on board before she saw that her husband was supreme as a king in command, and his word was law in everything, even to the killing of a poor sailor who had done a slight wrong."

"Also she saw that the crew were not of one nationality, but of a dozen."

"And more, one day a vessel was attacked and captured, the crew murdered, and the flag raised at the peak was black as ink, and bore the skull and cross-bones in the center."

"With horror she turned to her husband, for her eyes were opened, and accused him of deceiving her."

"He laughed at her, and then came the cruel words:

"Yes, I am a pirate, and the priest who married us, is my lieutenant, one of the worst devils on board ship."

"She gazed at him with horror and fright, and unable to utter a word.

"Laughing rudely at her anguish, he said, addressing her by her maiden name:

"Come, Miss Belle Denham, don't be a fool, but be worthy the honor of being the wife of Captain Brandt the Buccaneer."

"Good God! that fiend did this wrong to that poor girl?" cried Captain Meredith savagely.

"He did, sir."

"And it broke her heart, poor child?"

"No, it nearly killed her; but she escaped from the vessel throwing herself overboard one night in a blow, to end her wretched days.

"A strange Fate sheltered her, for she was washed up against a small craft that was lying to, riding out the gale.

"Instinctively she grasped at the side of the vessel, her hand caught a rope trailing in the sea, and with superhuman strength she held on and cried for help, which came in the persons of several seamen who drew her on board and she was saved.

"Thus saved, she determined to live for revenge against Brandt, the Buccaneer, and at last returned to her home.

"There she told her story to her mother, and the shock proved fatal to the loving woman, who was a confirmed invalid.

"Her death Belle Denham set down as the murder of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and she treasured up another feeling of revenge against him."

"And this poor girl was the sister of Little Belt you say?" asked Captain Meredith, who had been deeply interested in the story of his mysterious visitor.

"Yes, sir."

"Then the youth aided the chief to escape, in order that he might himself avenge the wrongs done his sister?"

"Yes, Captain Meredith, and, after carrying out his plot successfully, he determined to keep near the chief, and started with him to Baltimore that same night on horseback, that they might catch a packet ship that was to sail early in the morning.

"On the road Brandt, the Buccaneer, learning from the youth that he intended tracking him down, yet not recognizing who he was, treacherously shot him, and, as he believed killed him, and galloping away, left him lying in the road.

"But a farmer passing near found the boy and carried him to his home, and there he remained until he was able to again start on the track of the Buccaneer Chief."

"And where is the boy now?"

"He came South in coasting packets, as his health permitted, for his wound was a severe one, and it was while rowing away from his vessel in a calm, that he discovered the pirate vessel hidden in the lagoon, and informed you, sir."

"But you informed me, Mr. Belden."

"Yes, and I am the one of whom I have been speaking."

"My dear sir, you were speaking of a boy, Little Belt," impatiently said Captain Meredith.

"True, sir, but Little Belt, Mr. Belden, and Belle Denham are one and the same, Captain Meredith, for I am disguised as an old man, when I am in reality a woman, and spoke of a brother merely to mislead you, for a brother I never had."

"Great Heavens! now I know you, and the face of Little Belt comes back to me; but your disguise is wonderful indeed," and Captain Meredith arose and paced to and fro in a state of great excitement.

CHAPTER XII.

UNEXPECTED NEWS.

FOR some moments Captain Mayo Meredith paced the floor of his cabin, his eyes now and then rising to the face of his visitor with a curious look.

At last the disguised woman said in a low tone, and which was soft and sweet, showing that her voice before had been forced, to aid in her disguise:

"You know, now, Captain Meredith, who I am?"

"Yes, but I can hardly believe it."

The woman carefully removed a perfect wig of gray hair, which she wore, revealing a mass of short curls that were beautiful.

"My beard is more difficult to remove, sir, but I will do so if you wish."

"No, no, I am convinced, for now I recognize Little Belt's curls," said Captain Meredith.

"If you look closely, sir, you will see that these lines of age are manufactured, for I am not as old as I look," she said, with a slight smile.

"I doubt you no longer, madam, and—"

"My name is Mr. Belden, if you please, Captain Meredith," she interrupted.

"Pardon me, it will be better for you to keep that name, unless you wish to explain to the ship's crew why their great favorite, Little Belt, turned traitor and released Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"No, no I have no such desire, and shall continue to hide Belle Denham and Little Belt under the appearance of an old man, and the name of Mr. Belden."

"But I trust you will believe me, now, Captain Meredith, when I tell you what I heard between Lieutenant Graham and Midshipman Martin against poor Monte."

"I cannot do otherwise, for I am convinced you tell the truth—What is it, my lad?"

The latter remark was addressed to a cabin-boy who entered somewhat timidly.

"Dispatches, sir, brought by the packet just in."

The captain took the papers, and with a bow of apology to his visitor, broke the seal.

He had read but a few lines when he turned pale and cried:

"Heavens and earth! what does this mean?"

Mr. Belden, as I must still call the disguised woman, answered:

"I hope no bad news, sir?"

"Startling news at any rate, for the Secretary of the Navy writes me that he hopes I did not delay the execution of the mutineer midshipman, Merle Monte, any longer than necessary, after the return of Midshipman Langley with orders to hang him as an example to the hot-bloods of the service."

"But your orders were to send him to Washington, I believe you said?"

"They were, and here they are."

As Captain Meredith spoke he took up some official papers and handed them to his visitor, who, after glancing at them, asked:

"Did you know Midshipman Vernon, sir?"

"No."

"Nor was he recognized by any one on board?"

"I believe not, though we knew there was a midshipman of that name in the service."

"Do you observe, Captain Meredith, that these papers have been trifled with?"

"I do observe it now, though I did not before."

"Yes, writing has been erased with acids, and other words substituted."

"By Neptune! but I will sail after the Reindeer and bring back Mr. Roy Vernon, if the Sea Wolf has the legs to catch her; but here is a letter marked from the Reindeer now."

It was a letter from the captain of that vessel, and so surprised was Captain Meredith at its contents, that he read it aloud after the few first lines.

"As we were run down," said the letter, "all on the Reindeer were transferred to the Dauntless, and brought back to this port, so I return to you the dispatches and mail sent by me for delivery, with regret at my inability to do so."

"An accident to the Reindeer it seems has happened, from that," said Mr. Belden.

"Yes, and I shall soon know all about it, and I sincerely trust that Mr. Roy Vernon was not drowned."

"And that Mr. Merle Monte was, if the gallows is to be his end," put in Mr. Belden, while Captain Meredith called for his cabin boy.

That youth at once put in an appearance.

"Who brought these dispatches on board?"

"A boat from the packet ship Dauntless, sir."

"Tell the officer of the deck to send on board the Dauntless, and request her commander and the captain of the Reindeer to visit me at once."

The boy disappeared, and as the Dauntless was anchored but a short distance away, the boat returned in a very few moments with the captain of the Reindeer, who reported that his brother captain had gone ashore to make known his arrival in port to the agents.

"You are the one I wished particularly to see, sir, for I would like to know what has happened."

"My vessel was run into by the Dauntless in a fog, and sunk."

"And Midshipman Vernon and his prisoners, sir?"

"Why, Captain Meredith, they left me off the Delta, some days before."

The captain could hardly believe what he heard.

"Left you, sir, how and when?"

"Midshipman Vernon remembered that he had left his dispatches, and ordered me to hail a smack near by that he might return for them."

"I did so, and he, his prisoners and marines went on board, and that is all I can tell you regarding them."

Captain Meredith was more astounded than ever; but he quietly thanked the commander of the Reindeer, who then departed on his return to the Dauntless.

As soon as he left the cabin, Captain Meredith turned to his visitor with:

"Well, what do you make of all this?"

"That Roy Vernon, the Midshipman, like myself, is sailing under false colors," was the cool reply.

"So it seems.

"But, tell me, did you ever hear that Merle Monte was the son of Brandt, the Buccaneer?"

"I never did, sir; nor do I believe it."

"The charge was made upon my deck by Midshipmen Martin and Menken, and Lieutenant Graham corroborated them."

"It was a part of their plot against him, Captain Meredith."

"Yet it looks strange now, that the youth should have escaped, and I am almost tempted to believe that this Vernon was a hireling of that arch-fiend Brandt."

"Yet why should he wish to save a youth, who certainly captured him twice?"

"True, and yet I am convinced there is some link between Merle Monte and Brandt, the Buccaneer, whatever it may be."

"This thought I cannot get out of my mind; though, that the youth is the son of the pirate I do not, cannot believe."

"Nor do I, sir; but I see that a blow is coming up, so I will go ashore," said Mr. Belden.

"My cabin is wholly at your service, I wish you to feel."

"Thank you; but I shall return to the hotel, the Royal, where if you need me I can be found."

A few more words and the visitor left, and Captain Meredith was alone with his conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Darkness came on, but he heeded it not, nor did he seem to hear the getting all in shipshape on board to meet the storm that came on with the night.

But suddenly he was startled from his deep reverie by the entrance of an officer with tidings that struck him dumb with amazement, for they were more startling than any he had yet heard on that eventful day.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN BRANDT MAKES A THREAT.

DARKNESS almost tangible was falling upon the waters of the Mississippi, and dimming the lights of New Orleans, as seen from the deck of the little smack, in the cabin of which Merle Monte and his slave Mezrak were prisoners, when a boat came hastily out from the shore, and was hailed by Lieutenant Adolpho, still in his disguise of an old, gray-haired fisherman.

"Boat ahoy!"

"Ay, ay," came the answer from one who sat in the stern sheets, though the two oarsmen did not stop rowing.

"What boat is that?"

"The Adolpho," was the answer.

"Ay ay, come alongside," called out the lieutenant, the answer having convinced him that all was right.

A moment after a tall form, wearing a heavy cloak, sprung on the deck of the little smack.

"Alert, I see, Adolpho?"

"Yes, captain."

"A bad night."

"Yes, captain, it threatens to be a bad night."

"The very night for us, for we strike our blow under this infernal darkness."

"Ha! You sail then to-night?" cried the other, gayly.

"Yes, and in the cutter. But how are the prisoners?"

"All safe, sir."

"I would see them," and the two moved toward the cabin.

Merle was lying in his bunk, enjoying the rocking of the little smack upon the waves, which the increasing wind was raising upon the bosom of the river, and Mezrak was seated upon the floor, indulging in his pipe, which was ever a solace to him.

They both looked up at the entrance of Captain Brandt, who wore no disguise, though his face was in shadow from his slouch hat and the collar of his cloak.

"Well, I have come for a little talk with you, Monte," said Captain Brandt, throwing himself in an easy-chair, and turning toward the youth, who had not risen from his bunk.

"We can but listen," was the response of the youth.

"I intend to leave the city to-night."

"Well, does that interest me?"

"It does."

"In what respect?"

"You go with me."

"In this smack?"

"No."

"You have another vessel, then?"

"I may say yes, for I will have one within two hours."

"I suppose you refer to the cutter?"

"I do."

"I hope Captain Meredith will think to have a large crew on board."

"He has not been so thoughtful, for there are but half a dozen men, a lieutenant and two midshipmen."

"Lieutenant Dunning Graham, I suppose?" quickly asked Merle.

"Yes."

"Do you know the middies?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me their names?"

"Certainly: one is named Paul Martin and the other Heber Menken."

"Ah!"

"I understand your exclamation for they are the three officers upon whose testimony you were condemned as a mutineer, and who charged you with being my son."

"The former I was guilty of, but I am not so base as to be guilty of the latter charge."

The pirate frowned at this uncomplimentary remark regarding himself, but answered:

"I told them that you were my son."

"Ah! you are in league with them, then?"

"No; they knew me only as a picked-up acquaintance whom the two middies met at a cafe, and I told them a story about you to

cause them to suspect your faith as an officer of the navy."

"They swallowed the story greedily, and to aid themselves in swearing against you as a mutineer, they brought in the story about your being the son of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and candidly, this did much to prejudice the court-martial against you."

"I know that it did, but I do not know why you should tell such an infamous falsehood."

"I will tell you: you see I sought to disgrace you in the eyes of your brother officers to an extent that would drive you from the navy."

"Once under disgrace, and I believed you would be my victim—"

"Never!"

"Well, I thought so, and by aiding you, I felt we could serve each other; but I did not form the mutiny, which so nearly cost you your life, and would have done so, but for my little scheme which got you off."

"I really believe I would rather be hanged than owe my escape to you."

"Wouldn't you, Mezrak?"

"Yes, master," frankly responded the Abyssinian.

"Well, we will see what is to be done."

"I want that treasure, or half of it, and you and your slave are free the moment you give me my share."

"Not a peso, gem, or piece of plate shall you have from me."

"You love your gold, then?"

"No, I care little for money, but I will die rather than you should force from me the treasure," said Merle firmly.

"And so will Mezrak," echoed the slave, in his deep tones.

Captain Brandt bit his lip, but said calmly:

"Why, you can go to another land and live like a prince on your share."

"I am a Prince of Persia, and the entire treasure is my inheritance, so I share with no one," was the proud response.

Again Captain Brandt bit his lip, and replied:

"Well, we will see how far you will stand torture before you reveal the secret."

"To the end."

"I doubt it."

"Try me."

"Oh, you are game, I well know, but when the iron begins to enter your soul you will speak."

"Not I."

"The slave will."

"Not he."

"We shall see."

"Ay, you shall see."

"Why, Brandt, do you not hear daily that the untutored red children of our American forests die at the stake, and sing their death-songs proudly in spite of all torture?"

"Yes, there are such stories told."

"Well, you will find what those Indians have done that Mezrak and myself can do."

"If you doubt it, try us; and if you do not intend to torture us to-night, leave us, for we would be alone."

CHAPTER XIV.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

At Merle's bold words the pirate chief grew black in the face; but with an effort he controlled himself, and said:

"I will not tarry longer now, for I have work before me; but know that you go with me aboard the cutter, and once at sea I can vent my full humor upon you, and we shall find out who triumphs."

"Now submit to what I do, or I shall use force."

"What would you do?"

"Double iron you and gag you."

"Is this necessary?"

"Yes, for I wish no alarm given at a moment that may prove fatal to us."

"I have had indignities enough of late without that."

"I must do it."

The Floating Feather.

"I will give you my pledge to utter no word or alarm."

"By heaven! I will trust you!"

"Thank you."

"But the slave must be gagged."

"He will also give his pledge."

"No, for I will not take his word."

"Then I will give mine for him."

"No, it will not do."

"Then gag me also, for I accept no favors not shown Mezrak," bravely said the youth.

"Master, Mezrak does not care, so let them gag him and leave you free," remarked the Abyssinian.

"No; either both of us are free, or both must be gagged," was Merle's firm response.

"By heaven! I will gag the slave and not you," angrily said the chief.

"Then I withdraw my pledge not to give an alarm, for I will not allow Mezrak to suffer while I, who have brought him into trouble, escape free."

"You are a strange youth," muttered Captain Brandt, even his pirate heart touched by the devotion of the boy to the black.

For a moment there was silence, and then Captain Brandt called to Lieutenant Adolpho:

"Bring the gags and some ropes," he ordered.

They were soon brought, and, ironed hand and foot as they were, Merle and Mezrak saw the utter uselessness of resistance, and submitted calmly to the indignity.

"Now, Adolpho, have all ready to get in the smack's boat, and join me as I pass by," ordered the chief.

"And the smack?"

"Leave her at anchor where she is, the black flag at her mast-head, as a souvenir of Brandt, the Buccaneer," was the stern response.

"Ay, ay, sir, I will be ready to join your boats as they pass," answered the lieutenant, seemingly pleased with the idea of leaving the smack under the pirate flag.

"And you, sir, I have to ask to perform a part in the boarding of the cutter," and Captain Brandt turned to Merle once more.

"I will take no part, sir, to aid in your nefarious purpose."

"I ask you simply to pledge me your word that you will simply board the vessel and enter her cabin, for I shall free you of your irons and all."

"I will not."

"I have a purpose in asking this, and I expect you to acquiesce."

"You will be disappointed, for your purpose is to let it be reported that I led in the attack, for ere this it is known that we escaped from the Reindeer, and of course it will be thought we were again aided by our pirate friends."

"Yes, it is reported that your pirate father, Captain Brandt, aided you," sneered the chief.

"Then if I go on board the Reindeer it must be in irons."

"No, you will go free, and simply enter the cabin and take a seat; for I ask you to take no part."

"I will not do it."

Captain Brandt smiled, and said:

"I will accept your pledge to give no alarm, and make no effort to escape."

"It is useless for you to ask more," firmly responded Merle Monte.

"Lieutenant Adolpho, call two of your men aft."

The order was obeyed, and accompanying the two seamen, the men who had acted as the pretended Roy Vernon's marines, came Needles.

"Lash two ropes to that black imp, one around his waist, the other to his feet," sternly ordered Captain Brandt.

In spite of Mezrak's giant strength, his irons and his bonds prevented him from struggling to any great extent, and the two ropes were securely tied to him, "fore and aft" as Needles remarked, and he lay prostrate and helpless upon the deck.

Merle was also too securely bound to offer resistance, and then came the order:

"Gag that game youth!"

This order was promptly and effectually obeyed.

"Now fetch that starboard anchor," and the command was executed, the heavy iron anchor weighing over a hundred pounds, being laid near the Abyssinian.

"Make it fast to the body of that black Satan!"

At this Merle grew livid, but he was unable to move or utter a cry, and could only gaze with firm, glaring eyes, upon the scene.

"Now, Merle Monte, you know Brandt, the Buccaneer, and that he does not fear to keep his word, and therefore heed what is said to you.

"You are fully sufficient to make known to me the secret I would find out, and I believe the influence of that black devil keeps you from so doing.

"Hence, I swear to you, unless you give oath that you will board the cutter with me, sword in hand, and enter its cabin and remain there until I join you, without a look or word to cause alarm, I will sink that wretch in the mud of the Mississippi and leave him there."

"He shall be sunk before your eyes, and go down so slowly, under the light of a lantern held near him, that you shall witness his death agonies."

"You have heard me, Merle Monte, and if you will swear as I demand, simply nod your head."

"If you refuse, shake your head as a negative."

"What say you?"

Quickly and repeatedly the head was nodded. Merle Monte had been brought to terms through his love for Mezrak, although the Abyssinian had shaken his head in token that he wished him to refuse and let him die.

CHAPTER XV.

A TRAITOR'S FATE.

As the night grew older the storm grew fiercer, until at midnight there were few wayfarers abroad in the streets, and an air of desolation rested upon the city.

Suddenly up to the door of the Cafe Louis dashed a vehicle, and a man in a cloak got out and knocked loudly upon the huge brass knocker.

Pierre Louis himself opened the door.

"Well, I am ready, so what say your agents?" asked the visitor in a low tone.

"The men are all ready, and an oarsman is in each boat, holding it off on the river awaiting a hail," said Louis.

"Good! Will you go with me to the cutter?"

"I will ride down to the levee with you, and watch the result, captain, but I care not to be seen in the attack."

"Come, let us drink a bottle of my best to your success."

"Send it to my room, then," and Captain Brandt passed on to his apartments.

All there was in confusion, for carpet-bags were near the door and the chamber looked as though the packing up had been hasty.

Taking a long, slender bundle from the table, and which contained a sword and a pair of pistols, Captain Brandt stood ready to depart, when Pierre Louis entered, bearing a bottle and two glasses.

"This is a bottle of the best in the cellar, captain, and was overhauled on the high seas when sent from Spain's king to Cuba's Governor-general, as a souvenir of his majesty's regard.

"Try it, and we drink your success and fortune, and, if the rope must come, may the hemp not yet be sown to make it."

"You give a cheerful toast, Louis, by my faith, when a man is on the eve of dangerous work."

"But here is a bumper," and glass after glass of the fine wine was dashed off by the chief until the bottle was emptied.

"Now come!" he said, shortly.

"And the woman?"

"What woman?"

"Your wife."

"Ah! she had escaped my memory."

"You refer to what shall be done with the child?"

"Yes, captain."

"Let Celine have her when she comes."

"She is here now."

"Now?"

"Yes, she has taken rooms here, she said to be near her child, and get possession of it the moment you gave her permission."

"Ah, yes."

"Well, let her have it when I have gone, if so you wish."

"Come! for I have no time to tarry."

They descended the stairs, entered the waiting carriage, and were whirled rapidly through the deserted streets.

At last the levee was reached and the vehicle drew up.

"Here, monsieur, this is where you wished to be set down," said the driver politely.

"And here is your fee, my man."

"Ah! merci, monsieur, but this is an eagle of gold," cried the delighted hackman.

"Yes, but I can afford it," was the dry response of Captain Brandt as he strode away, followed by Louis bearing his carpet-bag.

Going to a part of the levee where the bank jutted into the river, they found there a man, crouching beneath the shadow of a tree.

"Is that you, Soto?" asked the chief.

"Si, senor," answered the man in Spanish.

"Where are the runners?"

"There beneath the bank, senor captain."

"And the boats?"

"Half a cable's length off on the river, senor."

"Send the runners at once to the cafes after the men, and let them lose no time," was the next order.

A low whistle from the man addressed as Soto brought half a dozen men to his side, all enveloped in heavy cloaks or wraps.

He spoke a few words to them and they darted away in the gloom.

"Now call in the boats, Soto, for there is no fear of our being discovered on such a night as this."

Soto gave a low call and waited.

It was but a short time before dark objects were visible through the darkness and storm approaching.

They were boats, and they came on so noiselessly that it was evident that their oars were muffled.

"Are the arms in the boat?" asked the chief.

"Si, senor, and protected from the rain."

"And the luggage of the crew?"

"All in the boats, senor."

A few moments of waiting followed, and just as the buccaneer leader began to grow impatient at the delay, a man appeared.

Then came another, and another, and in twos and threes they rapidly arrived and were assigned to the boats in which they were to go, and given a few orders in a low tone by Brandt, the Buccaneer.

As the last of the party were stepping into the boat a burly fellow came close to Captain Brandt and said:

"Here is a note sent you, sir."

"Who sent it?"

"I do not know, sir, but he said it was important, and if you wish to read it here I have a dark lantern with me."

"Turn it upon the paper then—gently, for no light must be seen here," and the chief leant over to read the note, when the man flashed a dark lantern full in his face, and cried:

"Lads, this is Brandt, the Buccaneer!"

"Aid me to take him, and your pardons await you."

"I am an officer of the Government."

He had sprung back as he spoke and leveled a pistol.

But ere he could use it, a long, keen blade descended into his back, and piercing his heart he fell dead.

"Well done, Louis,"

"You served that traitor right and saved my life."

"I'll not forget you," and Captain Brandt glanced quickly over the crew in the boats.

But if any of them had had any desire to follow the lead of the detective, that desire quickly ended with his death.

"One moment, Captain Brandt," and Louis touched the chief upon the shoulder as he turned to enter the boat.

"Ah, yes, my good Louis, I forgot to grasp your hand in farewell."

"It is not that, captain, but I brought along another bottle of that nectar, with a silver cup to drink it from."

"See?"

"Ever thoughtful Louis."

"Here is your very good health."

"And here is your success and fortune, a fleet craft, and a long life."

The wine was dashed off, the cups thrown into the murky waters of the Mississippi, and springing into his boat, Brandt sternly gave the order:

"Give way, men!"

"Pull for the Sea Serpent!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BOAT ATTACK.

NOISELESSLY through the storm of rain and wind the boats moved on their way, the chief leading.

The rain poured down in torrents, nearly filling the boats, and the waves dashed over the bows and gunwales.

But not a word was spoken, and the owners tugged hard at their muffled oars.

Presently a dark object loomed up before them, and through the gloom came the stern hail:

"Boat aboy!"

"Adolpho!"

The reply came from the chief, and as the boat ran close under the stern of the smack, he asked:

"Are you all ready, Adolpho?"

"Yes, captain."

"The men are in the boat?"

"They are, sir."

"And the black?"

"Is ironed, bound and gagged."

"The Senor Monte?"

"Is here by my side?"

"In irons?"

"Yes, senor."

"Gagged?"

"Yes, captain, I deemed it best."

"Release him now of all bonds."

The boat from the smack was now swung along broadside to that in which was Brandt, the Buccaneer, and after a moment the chief said:

"Senor Monte, I have your pledge?"

"You have," was the low reply.

"The breaking of it will end the life of the black, your slave, while you will be kept."

"I would never give a pledge, sir, I expected to break," was the haughty reply.

"It is well."

"We are now running upon the cutter, and I wish you to board with me and then go to the cabin and await my coming."

"And Mezrak?"

"Shall be kept in safety, as I have given you my pledge."

"A pirate's pledge," sneered Merle.

But the chief made no reply, and the boats moved on.

Presently there bounded up before them a long, dark object, which seemed to crouch upon the waters.

Above it ran high in air two tapering masts, that raked to a wonderful degree.

It was the cutter Sea Serpent, once a Revenue Cutter of the United States, and captured by Brandt the Buccaneer, and then retaken by the boats of the Sea Wolf in a lagoon below the city.

Once more in the hands of the Government the schooner had been refitted and put in per-

fect order, and with a crew from the Sea Wolf on board was anchored off the town.

Little dreaming of danger, Lieutenant Dunning Graham and Midshipman Paul Martin had turned in for the night, after having discussed the escape of Merle Monte, and wondered if he would seek revenge upon them.

Midshipman Heber Menken was in charge of the deck, and fond of comfort, had stowed himself away in the lee of the companionway, where, with the storm-cloak wrapped around him, he had dropped into a nap.

Forward were two men supposed to be on watch, but they had taken advantage of the young officer's retreat to better quarters, to also seek snug places in which to escape the storm.

Thus it was that Brandt, the Buccaneer, with Merle Monte by his side, and five-score men at their back, had ascended to the deck of the cutter without a hail or even being seen.

"Seize the craft, lads!" cried the chief, and instantly the pirates spread themselves through the ship.

But Midshipman Menken was awake now, and his call brought the lieutenant and Paul Martin quickly on deck, while there was a clash of steel and a shot or two forward, as several gallant tars resisted capture.

But hardly had the officers appeared upon deck, armed but half dressed, when they were set upon by the pirates and would have been mercilessly cut down, had not a stern voice cried:

"Seize those men, but don't harm them!"

The order was instantly obeyed, though Heber Menken had received a wound in the arm.

And it was Merle Monte who gave the order, Captain Brandt having gone forward.

Seeing that his former brother officers were not going to be harmed, Merle passed on and entered the cabin, as he had sworn so to do.

A few moments of suspense passed, and then the chief entered.

"Senor Monte, the cutter is ours, my men are setting sail and getting up the anchors, and soon we will be flying down the river."

Merle made no reply, and Captain Brandt continued:

"As soon as we are in deep water I will release your slave, and he can serve you, but for the present I have sent him below."

The captain disappeared, and a few moments after Merle looked up, as others came down into the cabin.

He was seated in an easy-chair at the table, and half arose as two women came in holding between them, securely bound, Lieutenant Dunning Graham.

Then came the pirate officer Adolpho, and behind him others of the crew of Captain Brandt with Midshipmen Menken and Martin.

Merle's face flushed crimson at sight of them, and then became deadly pale.

But before he could speak the pirate officer said:

"Senor Captain Monte, these are your three foes, and I would know if they shall be put in irons and carried on our cruise?"

"No; release them."

The words broke from the lips of Merle Monte almost with a sob, and rising, he turned away, while Adolpho quickly hurried the prisoners out of the cabin, and whose looks proved that they were dumb with amazement.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

CAPTAIN MAYO MEREDITH had been too much worried by all that he had heard about Merle and the trick played upon him by the pretended Midshipman Roy Vernon to seek rest, and sat until a late hour in gloomy meditation.

Presently a hail was heard on deck, and an answer came from a boat off on the water.

Then followed the words from the officer of the deck:

"Come alongside!"

Surprised that a boat should come off at that time of night, for he knew no officer had gone ashore in the storm, Captain Meredith waited to see what was the matter.

Presently down the companionway came a middy.

"Mr. Belden to see you, sir, and begs pardon for so late a call, but he has important news."

"Admit him."

The next instant Mr. Belden entered, and he seemed excited.

"Your pardon, Captain Meredith, but I am glad to find you have not retired."

"Throw your cloak and hat aside, sir, and be seated," said the captain, and as he spoke he took the dripping garments.

"Captain, after I left you, sir, I met a man whom I had met on shipboard coming out, and whom I knew to be a Government officer.

"He congratulated me upon the capture of the cutter, having heard of it, and confessed that as he had finished the business he came on, he had started on the difficult work of hunting down Brandt, and asked my aid.

"Willingly I joined him, and then he told me that a recent expedition was being formed, and he believed that Brandt was at the head of it.

"He had enlisted with other men, and the terms, as he expressed it, were for red work and yellow metal.

"We went to a cafe together, and then, to his surprise he met one of the crew who had enlisted with him, and was told they were to move at once, and that their chief awaited them at Ferry Point on the river.

"He had to go, but asked me to run to the officers of the law and get men to come there.

"I thought of seeking you, but knew I had not time, so hastened to the guard-house and made my report.

"Instantly the guards were turned out, two-score in number, and we went at a double quick to the point, to find there the dead body of the detective.

"He had been killed by a knife-thrust in the back, and his pockets had been rifled.

"We met a man near the spot, and he was recognized as the keeper of a cafe, and he reported that he had seen a number of men standing on the point as he passed, and that they had evidently gone off in boats.

"Then the chief of the guards went to give the alarm to the river guard-boats, and I hastened to see you, not knowing but that, as the detective said he knew Brandt to be in the city, he would attempt to cut out the Sea Serpent— Ha! there is a hail now."

As the pretended Mr. Belden spoke, loud voices were heard on deck, then came many footsteps, and the next moment into the cabin walked Lieutenant Dunning Graham, pale and excited, and behind him came Midshipmen Martin and Menken, also very white and nervous looking.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REPORT.

"WELL, Lieutenant Graham, this certainly is an unexpected visit," said Captain Meredith, his heart sinking with dread, when he saw the three officers who had been sent to the Sea Serpent.

"It is unexpected to me, also, Captain Meredith, and I regret that I come to report the loss of my vessel."

"Lost!" cried the captain.

"Yes, sir, not half an hour ago."

"Sunk by the storm at her anchorage?"

"I only wish that such was the case, sir."

"In Heaven's name what worse has happened?"

"She was taken at her moorings by pirates."

"Ha! by Brandt, the Buccaneer?"

"No, sir; he was not the leader."

"Ah! a new pirate is to raise his flag," said the captain with a sneer, and then he continued:

"Where were yourself and crew, sir?"

"On board, sir, and Midshipman Menken held the deck."

"Make your report, please, and lose no time, Lieutenant Graham."

Thus urged, the lieutenant said:

"After getting all shipshape, sir, to meet the blow, I went below, and at an early hour Midshipman Martin and myself turned in, leaving Mr. Menken in charge."

"Then, Mr. Menken, be good enough to make your report, sir."

"I was leaning over the port quarter, sir, gazing out upon the storm-swept waters," began the middy, with a ready lie, "when I suddenly heard steps behind me, and beheld scores of armed men pouring over the starboard side.

"I called for aid and endeavored to resist, but receiving a wound in my sword arm was disabled."

"The men forward were also on watch, and resisted all in their power, but were at once cut down, for we lost six out of over ten seamen, sir."

"At this moment Lieutenant Graham and Midshipman Martin rushed on deck half dressed, but armed, yet all of us would have been cut down, but for the stern order of the pirate leader to spare us."

"We were then seized," put in Lieutenant Graham, "for we dared not resist against scores, and were taken to the cabin, where the pirate chief, after giving orders to slip the cable and set sail, had gone."

"We were led before him, and an under officer cried:

"Here, captain, we have brought you your foes for punishment."

"But the chief ordered our release, and bade us depart at once for our vessel."

"Kind of him at least; but you say he was not Brandt, the Buccaneer?" queried Captain Meredith.

"No, sir, and for the honor of the service I only wish that it had been Brandt!"

"I do not understand you, Lieutenant Graham."

"The leader of the pirates, sir, was an ex-officer of our service."

"Ha! do you mean this?"

"I do, sir."

"Do you know him?"

"I do, sir."

"Speak! and tell me who he is."

"Merle Monte!"

"Great God!"

The words broke from the lips of Captain Meredith as though wrung by anguish.

But conquering his emotion he asked in a husky voice:

"Do you speak the truth, Graham?"

"Captain Meredith!"

"Hold, Graham, no airs with me, sir, for I repeat the question, knowing your hatred, and that of Midshipmen Martin and Menken, for Merle Monte."

The lieutenant dropped his feathers and answered:

"I know Mr. Monte well, sir, and he it was."

"And you say the same, young gentlemen?" and Captain Meredith turned to the two midships.

"It was Merle Monte, sir," said Martin.

"It was the mutineer midshipman, sir," answered Menken, who was smarting under his wound, which he was tenderly nursing.

"Then, there is no doubt but that he was there; but are you sure he was a leader?"

"He was the leader, sir," answered Midshipman Martin.

"Yes, for the under officer addressed him as captain," put in the lieutenant.

"Then, gentlemen, I can no longer doubt.

"As you have lost your vessel, return to your duties here, and, Lieutenant Graham, ask the officer of the deck to at once get the Sea Wolf under way, for I shall go in pursuit of the pirate, and if I catch him, Merle Monte will swing to the yard-arm, I pledge you."

"There is no pilot on board, sir," suggested the lieutenant.

"Signal for one, and have the craft ready to sail at once."

"Mr. Belden, will you be my guest for the cruise?"

"No, sir, thank you, I will remain in the city to find out what has become of Captain Brandt."

"Then you do not think he went with the cutter too?"

"No, sir; for had he been there, he alone would have been in command," and wishing Captain Meredith a successful cruise, Mr. Belden took leave, and as he was rowed ashore he met the pilot going off, and ten minutes after saw the Sea Wolf flying away in the gloom in hot chase of the fugitive cutter.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PIRATE'S RUSE.

"WELL, Senor Merle, blue water is before us, and up goes my flag."

"Run it up to the peak, Lieutenant Adolpho," and Captain Brandt looked really happy as the swift-sailing vessel glided over the waters of the Gulf, having left the brown current of the Mississippi astern.

The sun was shining brightly, an eight-knot breeze was blowing, and the canvas was drawing well.

During the night the crew had been divided into watches, the guns had been looked to, the stores examined, the ammunition and arms overhauled, and all made thoroughly shipshape, for Captain Brandt was a strict disciplinarian, and ruled his crew with a rod of iron, while no vessel of the navy was kept in better trim.

Merle had slept little during the night, and the first rays of dawn found him upon deck, when he noticed that the storm had cleared away, and though the new crew had been on board but a short time all seemed at home, and everything was working well.

He had breakfasted with Captain Brandt, who had made himself most agreeable, and no reference had been made by the pirate to his capture of the cutter, or to his intentions, until the remark which opens this chapter, and the Gulf was before them.

"Then I suppose you will free my slave of his irons now, according to your promise?" said Merle Monte.

"Certainly."

"Senor Soto, have the slave of Mr. Monte freed of his irons and let him come on deck and act as waiter to my cabin," was the prompt response.

In a short while Mezrak appeared, his face as threatening as a thunder-cloud; but a glance at his young master changed his aspect, and Merle said simply:

"For the present, Mezrak, you will look to the comfort of Captain Brandt and myself in the cabin."

"As my master pleases," was the ready response, and the Abyssinian at once set about his duties.

Having gained a good offing, Captain Brandt suddenly lowered all sail upon the cutter, housed her topmasts, and carpenters were set to work with great haste carrying out certain instructions given them.

What it all meant Merle could not comprehend, for the guns and carriages were quickly lowered into the hold, the sails were darkened, and large patches put upon them where there was not a thread broken, and the work of the carpenters, hastily daubed with paint, was put along the top of the bulwarks, which at the time were raised several feet, giving the craft the appearance of a lugger's hull.

In a few hours, a complete metamorphosis was the result; and a sailor who had sailed for years in the cutter, might pass within a few fathoms of her so disguised, and fail to recognize the beautiful craft.

"Now, Senor Adolpho, set sail, and we'll head back to New Orleans, for I find we have very little ammunition in the magazine," was the remark of Captain Brandt, while Merle gazed on with surprise.

"Do you really intend to return to New

Orleans?" asked the youth, astounded at the daring of the man.

"Assuredly, for I must have ammunition."

"You will be recognized and taken."

"I'll take the chances: but I thank you for your interest in me."

"Ah, I have only the interest that others feel in you, Captain Brandt."

"And what may that be?"

"To see you hanged," was the quiet rejoinder.

"That you will never see, sir."

"But you should know your own vessel, so tell me if that is not the Sea Wolf?" and the pirate pointed far away over the water to where a vessel was just visible coming out of the Delta.

"Yes, that is the Sea Wolf, and she is in pursuit of you," said Merle eagerly.

"She will never find me."

"But when we get nearer I shall have to put your slave again in irons, and confine you to the cabin."

"We are in your power, sir," was the cold reply.

"I trust your good sense will take you out of it soon," and Captain Brandt smiled significantly.

Merle made no reply, but watched the movements on the cutter narrowly.

He saw that the few negroes in the crew were kept on deck, and that the remainder of the men were sent below.

Then Captain Brandt disappeared in the cabin, and soon returned in a rough sailor suit, a coarse false beard and wig, and with a tar-brimed face and hands.

Lieutenant Adolpho also underwent a change, and then Captain Brandt expressed himself as willing to run the gantlet.

As the vessels drew nearer together, Captain Brandt said:

"Senor Monte, will you step below, for I have ordered your slave put again in irons?"

"I can do nothing else."

"Remember, sir, a secret sign or signal, should Captain Meredith send a boat on board, will result in your instant death."

Merle made no reply and went below, and it was but a short while before he heard the ringing hail, in the voice of Captain Meredith:

"Lugger ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, sir," answered Captain Brandt.

"Where from?"

"Coast plantations, sir."

"Where bound?"

"City."

"Did you meet, or see, a trim-looking cutter to-day?"

"An armed ship?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which course was she on?"

"Heading so as to make Havana, I reckon."

"Were there many men on board?"

"Yes, about a hundred."

"Did you know the craft?"

"No, sir, and don't want to."

"Why?"

"She carried a black flag, and I gave her a wide berth."

"You were right, for the craft was a Buccaneer."

"Oh no!" shouted the disguised pirate with well feigned surprise, and the vessels being too far apart for more to be said, he laughed lightly and called down the companionway:

"How was that, Mr. Monte?"

But Merle Monte, although he could not but admire the daring of the Buccaneer, felt in no humor to admit it, and returned no answer, but looked longingly after the Sea Wolf as she sailed majestically along, with everything set that could draw.

CHAPTER XX.

A SCRAP OF PAPER.

INSTEAD of placing Merle in irons, as he expected the chief would do, upon re-entering the river, Captain Brandt accepted his pledge not to attempt to escape from the cutter, or hail

any passing boat, or call to any one he might see from the stern ports.

This pledge Merle gave in preference to being ironed and gagged; but he was surprised at the clemency shown him by the chief.

Poor Mezrak, however, was again heavily ironed and placed in the hold.

Fatigued by his loss of sleep of late, Merle sought his berth in the cabin at an early hour, and the following morning, the wind having been fair for a run up the river, he looked out of the stern ports to find the lugger riding at anchor off New Orleans once more.

How he longed to hail those he saw on the far off levee, and tell them the secret he held.

And how eagerly he scanned the waters, in hope that some vessel-of-war had come into port, and the flimsy disguise of the cutter would be discovered.

He knew that he would be the sufferer, were the vessel taken, but he was willing to be sacrificed could the pirate Brandt be hanged.

The negro cook, who served him with breakfast, told him the captain had gone ashore early, and said that Senor Monte should take his meals without him.

Merle ate listlessly, for he could not but be impressed with the terrible secret those wooden walls held.

All was quiet on board, the cutter lay to one anchor, and a few negroes, all of her crew whom the captain would allow to be visible, lolled about the decks, while the Senor Adolpho in disguise, but armed to the teeth, kept his eyes upon them, fully realizing the damage a traitor might do.

By a word or two Merle determined to test the negro cook, for if he could bribe him to aid him to seize the cutter, it would not really be breaking his pledge to Captain Brandt, as Merle had made no proviso of that kind, such a thing not having been taken into consideration even by the cunning and daring pirate leader.

"Well, Bono, you have shipped on a dangerous cruise," he said to start the conversation.

"Yas, massa; but it are mighty dangerousome ashore, I has found out."

"You have?"

"Yas, sah, fer somehow whar dar is suthin' ter drink, I gits drunk, an' den I is put in jail, or beated; so I runned away ter be free."

"You expect to make money by this cruise?"

"Yas, sah."

"About how much?"

"Lordy, massa, they do say as I mout make nigh onto a fortin, ef we does well."

"Would you be satisfied to return home, buy your freedom, and that of your wife, for I suppose you are married?"

"I w'u'd be pleased ter buy my freedom, sah, and that of the ole 'ooman; but I guesses it don't break my heart ter leave her, an' so I'll jist keep the change I'd have ter spend buying freedom, sah, an' go to the North country, whar they say niggers is free, and live thar comfortable."

"What did your master consider you worth?"

"He said I wasn't wuff a d—, sah, an' I guesses he was about right; but then he w'u'dn't have sell me for less nor six hundred dollars."

"Well, Bono, if you wish to get a small fortune without working for it, and risking your neck—for if you are caught on this vessel you'll be hanged for a pirate—I will give it to you."

"You is joking, massa."

"No, I am in earnest, and I will pay you in advance the gold, if you will do as I tell you."

"What I got to do, massa?"

"Call one of those fruit and vegetable boats alongside to buy something from the vender."

"Yas, massa."

"Get into the boat to select the best fruit and vegetables, and manage to hand this letter to the vender, with a gold-piece I will give you, and bid him take it with all haste to the address upon it."

"Yes, massa."

"I will write the note for you now, and

give you one thousand dollars, and when you swear to me that you have given the letter to a vender in safety, I will hand you as much more."

"Lordy! I'll be rich as Greasus I hears massa talk about as being so wealthy."

"Then you will do as I wish?"

"Yas, massa."

"Come to me in half an hour for the letter."

The negro disappeared, and, sitting down to the table, Merle wrote a hasty note, as follows:

"To the Commandant of the City Guard:

"The lugger-like craft lying off Ferry Point is none other than the captured cutter Sea Serpent, in disguise,

"Her captain, Brandt, the Buccaneer, is now ashore looking up ammunition, having had to return to the city for that purpose, after his daring escape with the vessel two nights ago.

"We found on our way into the South-west Pass of the river the Sea Wolf, who spoke us, but failed to recognize us.

"The guns of the cutter and ninety men of her crew are in the hold, so you will need a large force to capture her.

"MERLE MONTE,

"Ex-Midshipman U. S. Navy."

"Perhaps I had better carry that letter and lug in the duckits, senor?"

Merle started, for he recognized the voice.

It was the boy Needles who had been upon the smack.

"Will you do so?" he asked, eagerly.

"I hain't a traitor, and I hain't mean, or I'd report you and the nigger to the cap'n."

"Jist tear up that scrap of paper and I'll say nothing about it; but give it to the nigger, and you'll both swing."

The boy was standing in the door of the captain's state-room, which Merle had considered unoccupied, and seeing that he was caught, he simply tore the paper in fragments and threw them from the open port.

"Now you have sense," said Needles, as he quietly ascended to the deck, leaving Merle alone and deeply chagrined at his defeat.

CHAPTER XXI.

▲ BLACK DIAMOND.

At the time Merle Monte threw the bits of paper from the port a person was sitting upon the river bank, gazing at the lugger with some little interest.

It was a man of small stature and advanced years, and his occupation seemed to be to look at the vessels at anchor in the stream, and note their build and rig, for one after the other had caught his eye.

The cutter, in her disguise, had come in for close scrutiny, but he seemed tired of gazing at her seemingly awkward shape, and apparently patched sails, and was turning away when the bits of flying paper caught his eyes, which seemed by no means dimmed by age.

Then he again bent his gaze upon the lugger, and fairly started as he saw a man appear at the open port.

He looked at the face, framed in by the port, with a kind of fascination, and his lips moved as though he wanted to speak, yet had not the power of utterance.

Upon the deck of the lugger stood a white man and several negroes, but they were gazing shoreward, and twice he checked himself when about to make a signal to the one at the stern port.

The man's face had become pale with suppressed excitement, and he fairly trembled as he stood there, riveted to the spot.

The one in the port who attracted his attention was Merle Monte, and with his elbows on the sill, he leant out, seemingly oblivious of all around him as he gazed down into the brown, eddying waters.

Afraid, apparently, for fear of those on the deck, to attract the attention of Merle Monte, the old man turned and walked swiftly away, now and then glancing back over his shoulder, and still seeing the form and face at the port.

After crossing the levee he disappeared in a narrow street, while Merle Monte continued gazing listlessly out upon the waters, not hav-

ing noticed the strange individual, even if he had seen him in his rapt reverie.

An hour or two passed away and then a second form appeared upon the little jutting point of land, and stood gazing with apparent open-mouthed wonder and admiration at the numerous vessels lying at anchor opposite the city, for there were many of them, from the stately clipper ship to the sugar drogher, from the plantations on the coast.

This second individual was a negro boy of about sixteen.

He possessed a sinewy form, was black as ebony, and had a bushy mass of wool that served as hair, and upon which was stuck a cast-off sombrero of some gentleman's, so well worn that here and there in the top, were holes out of which stuck a patch of the kinky head covering.

His attire had also evidently done service for some one else before he inherited it, and certainly could not be considered fashionable, as the pants were baggy, and the jacket too large in every way.

A man who dropped the scales at double his weight could have worn his shoes, which were well ventilated in the toes.

With his hands clasped, as though in utter delight, this dark-faced youth stood grinning at the disguised cutter and other vessels, until he suddenly started with a cry of alarm as a hail rung out almost in his ear:

"Ho! the Polly!"

"Ay, ay, sir," answered Adolpho from the cutter.

"Send a boat ashore for me."

"Ay, ay, sir," came back the answer, and soon after a boat was seen approaching, rowed by two negro boatmen.

Then the ebony youth gained courage to look at the person whose hail had so alarmed him.

He beheld a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a dark, handsome face, and dressed in the white duck suit of a planter, while his head was sheltered by a broad-brimmed Panama.

It was Captain Brandt, in the disguise of a coast planter, which he had assumed upon going on shore.

"Golly, Massa Adm'ral, how yer did skeer me," said the boy, gaining courage, as he saw that the supposed planter did not harm him.

"Do you get frightened at a hail, boy?" asked Captain Brandt, for the first time seeming to observe the negro youth.

"I gits skeert putty often, sah, when I is ashore, fer I is a salt water nigger, an' thar I hain't afeerd o' nuthin'."

"Oh! you are a sailor?" and the pirate seemed amused at the boy.

"Yas, sah, I is, an' a good one."

"A good sailor should never be out of a berth, my lad."

"I c'u'dn't help it, sah, fer I comed up from ther plantation in ther drogher, an' ther niggers got me ter drink sum, an' here I is, while ther boat hav gone back home, an' massa layin' out ter warm my back when he cotches me."

"If I didn't think yer'd hit me, I'd ax yer ter steal me an' take me along with you, sah."

The pirate laughed and answered:

"Well, my lad, I'll do it, if you would like to go on a cruise; but it will be a long one."

"Thankee sah, I'll go, sah, an' I is awful handy 'round a table an' in cookin'."

"Then you are just the youth I need, and I will take you aboard with me."

"But what is your name?"

"Black Diamond they calls me, sah, on shore."

"Well, Black Diamond it shall be afloat, and you may bring me luck."

"Come, jump into the boat."

As the boat touched the shore the little black lad obeyed, and soon after was upon the deck of the disguised craft, where he at once set about his duties, though not until he had heard Senor Adolpho ask:

"What luck, captain?"

"Good! for the ammunition will be brought out soon and marked 'Plantation Stores.'"

"Then we get off by morning?"

"Before midnight, for the risk we run is fearful."

"Is all going well on board?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am glad of it, for I was most anxious the whole time I was away—Here, Black Diamond, spring to your work lively, or your second acquaintance on this craft will be with the cat.*

Black Diamond took the hint and listened no more.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PIRATE'S PRIZE.

As he had said, the boats came off with the boxes and barrels of ammunition, and the loading of the cutter attracted no attention, for it was then the custom to load the plantation craft in that way.

As soon as the last box was on board, the anchor was hauled up out of the mud, and the awkward-looking craft dropped down with the stream, the negro crew, aided by Black Diamond, clumsily setting the sails as she drifted along.

At last, under pressure of a fair breeze, she got under good headway, and held on downstream until the shadows of night shut her out from sight.

The following day the cutter, still in her disguise, was clearing the river when a stately vessel was coming in.

It was a large clipper ship, a packet between New Orleans and Baltimore, and Captain Brandt at once decided to make her his prize.

"Those northern packets are all richly freighted, Adolpho, and we can also get from her a good supply of provisions," he said.

"Then you intend to throw off our disguise and give chase, captain?" asked his lieutenant.

"By no means; I shall simply have you call the men up with their arms, and take her as we are."

"But will she not keep clear of us unless we use our guns, for with this rig we are not her equal in speed?"

"True; but I'll take the helm, and you shall see."

The chief then took the helm and gave orders for the men to come up from below, armed to the teeth, and await his orders.

The clipper was now coming on under a large spread of canvas, to make all she could out of the very light breeze that was blowing, and the course that both of the vessels were upon must bring them within a few fathoms of each other.

Nearer and nearer they came, until just as the clipper was but a few lengths away, the cutter began to steer wildly, and it looked to those on the packet as though the helmsman had suddenly lost his nerve, and did not know which side he would pass.

"Starboard your helm, you lubber!" shouted the clipper's captain through his trumpet.

The helmsman of the cutter at once obeyed for an instant, and then, appearing to think he was wrong, he sent the wheel flying to port.

"Starboard! hard starboard!" yelled the clipper's captain, and there was evidently great excitement on board.

But the wheel went hard a-port, and the cutter held straight across the bows of the ship.

The clipper's helmsman under a quick order, changed his course to try and clear the cutter, when, as though wholly alarmed, and not knowing what to do, Captain Brandt sent his wheel to starboard.

Loud and angry curses broke from the captain of the clipper, and all saw that but one thing would avoid a collision, and that might not wholly do so.

That was for the clipper to swing at once into the wind.

The order to do this rung out savagely from her captain's lips, and as the stately craft swung round, he said:

"You deserve to be run down, you lubberly land dog."

"Why in Satan's name didn't you let one of your niggers steer?"

Without immediately replying, and with a masterly movement, Captain Brandt laid the cutter alongside the ship, and springing upon her deck, sword and pistol in hand, shouted:

"Because Brandt, the Buccaneer, prefers to run his own vessel!"

"Up, lads, and the ship is ours!"

Words can never portray the complete surprise, horror and fright that fell upon the crew and passengers of the clipper at this masterly movement and daring attack.

As the pirate crew poured upon the deck in swarms, the clipper's captain, a brave old tar, though fairly caught, was not a man to tamely submit against any odds, and he called loudly upon all to:

"Beat back the red hounds, for remember they show no mercy."

A few sailors and as many more passengers sprung to his aid, with such arms as they could grasp.

But the rush of the pirates was irresistible, and the defenders of the clipper were mowed down before the onslaught.

A short, fierce fight, and Captain Brandt held the ship, and the work of robbery began, the buccaneer caring nothing for the killed and wounded.

A short hour, and the work of pillage had ended, the stores and booty had been thrown upon the cutter's deck, her crew was called off, and the clipper ship was allowed to continue on her way to the city, deprived of her cargo and with half a score of her crew dead or dying upon her decks, while the daring pirate held on his way into blue water, gloating over his good fortune, for, as he had hoped, his prize had been richly freighted.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FLOATING FEATHER.

"MR. MONTE, once more I welcome you on deck, and I have given orders that your slave shall have his irons knocked off and be our steward once more, while my new *protege*, Black Diamond, shall be his assistant, for I have given Needles over to Lieutenant Adolpho.

"I suppose you know that I got a rich haul from the clipper?" and Captain Brandt turned to his prisoner as pleasantly as though he were addressing a passenger.

"I know you robbed the ship of considerable rich freight and stores, and did not even neglect the pockets of the passengers," answered Merle, fearlessly.

"Don't be angry, Senor Monte, for I am determined to be good friends with you."

"See, I have stripped the cutter of her awkward disguise, and she rides the water like a thing of life."

"I intend to rechristen her, Senor Monte, now that she goes on a new career, so I beg you to name her for me."

"Call her Hades, for the Devil is certainly her commander," was Merle's reply, in a sinister tone.

"Don't slander the craft, Senor Monte, if you do her captain, for see how she glides along."

His sailor eye pleased with the real beauty of the vessel, Merle said, with admiration:

"The craft is a beauty, for she floats upon the sea like a feather."

"Ha! you have named her, by the holy Neptune, for she shall be called *The Floating Feather*."

"A pretty name truly, and one that suits the vessel, though not her career."

"I thank you for the name, Senor Monte, and I shall at once proceed to baptize the beauty."

"Senor Adolpho!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Muster the crew to witness the christening of this craft, for she is no longer the Sea Serpent, but the Floating Feather."

The crew were at once piped up, and, by the

captain's orders, ranged in two lines on either side of the deck.

Then the cutter was brought to, and an order from her chief caused a pivot-gun amidships to be loaded and pointed to starboard, and elevated above the bulwarks.

"Now, Senor Monte, you having named the Floating Feather, you must aid in her baptism."

"I shall take no hand in the infernal nonsense," slowly said Merle.

"You are mistaken, sir, you will."

"Senor Adolpho, have this man seized and bound!"

Merle saw that resistance was utterly in vain, and so did not move while his arms were bound to his side, and his wrists and ankles once more felt the galling of the manacles.

"Now, Adolpho, rig a rope about his waist, and run it up to the end of the yard-arm!"

This order was also obeyed.

"Half-a-dozen of you men stand ready to draw him up and make fast when I give the command!"

Silently six of the cruel crew stepped forward to obey.

"Now, bring that black imp of Purgatory on deck!" and Captain Brandt was smiling sweetly at every order.

A few moments of silence followed, and then appeared Mezrak, also heavily ironed, and led by two seamen.

"Stand there, you accursed slave," ordered Brandt, indicating the spot, and Mezrak, after a look at Merle, did as he was told.

"Now drag the Senor Monte into the air, and make fast!"

The half-dozen seamen obeyed, hand over hand upon the rope, and singing in chorus:

"Heave—ye—o!"

"Steady! there, let him swing as he is," and springing to the pivot-gun, Brandt, the Buccaneer, turned it directly upon the body of the youth, while even his own crew looked on in horror at what they feared would come next.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DEFIED.

WHITE as though dead, yet perfectly calm, Merle Monte swung in mid-air in irons and bonds, gazing at his enemy, while the huge gun was leveled directly at him.

Mezrak stood near, bound to the mast, and eying Brandt, the Buccaneer, with the frenzy of a tiger at bay gleaming from his eyes.

Lieutenant Adolpho leaned indifferently against the bulwarks, and the crew arranged in line, looked on in breathless suspense, their eyes turning alternately from the face of Merle Monte, to those of their chief and Mezrak.

"Bring me a lighted match, gunner," commanded Brandt, the Buccaneer, speaking in the same light tone he had before used.

The gun match was brought to him, and he laid it across the gun, while he deliberately took a powder-horn and primed it, so that there should be no misfire.

This done, he said, in a loud tone:

"Merle Monte, we are bitter foes, even though you stand upon the brink of an awful death."

"And I glory in being your foe, for I would be ashamed to be your friend," came the fearless retort.

"You know, and so does your accursed slave," continued Brandt, the Buccaneer, "that there is a secret that I would know, and which is locked in the hearts of you two."

"Confess that secret, pilot me to your retreat, and before all my crew I swear to you that you shall go free with half the riches you have hidden there."

"You shall never know, Brandt, the Buccaneer," came the firm response.

"Remember, I shall fire this gun in one minute, if you do not confess, and send your soul into eternity."

"Do so," was the cool reply.

The pirate chief bit his lip and said something in a low tone to his lieutenant.

"Try the black," whispered Adolpho.
"Hal a lucky thought," and, turning to Mezrak, he continued:

"Slave, do you see your master?"
"I am not blind," was the deep response.
"But do you realize his danger?"
"I do."
"Do you believe that I will keep my oath?"
"If it is to do wrong, yes," came the fearless rejoinder, and Brandt bit his lip as he saw that many of the crew appreciated the remark.

"Well, it is to do wrong, and I want you to hear me."

"I will listen."
"Do you know where Merle Monte's Treasure Island is?"

"I do."
"I mean are you sailor enough to pilot this craft there?"

"I am."
"Will you do so?"

"I will not."
"Slave, hear me—and for the last time!"

"I fear not your threats."
"Not for yourself, I believe you; but I brought your master to terms through threatening you, and I shall try the same plan now."

Mezrak looked quickly up, and an expression of pain covered his black face; but he saw only a smile on the fearless countenance of his young master, and his features resumed their stony look once more.

"Now, slave!"
"I swear to you," cried Brandt, the Buccaneer, in ringing tones, "if you do not confess the secret of where lies Merle Monte's Treasure Island, I will fire this gun and blow him, body and soul, into atoms!"

He held the lighted match over the priming as he spoke, and a breathless silence followed, and was then broken by Mezrak's deep tones:

"Shall I confess, massa?" asked Mezrak, and his voice trembled as though he feared the answer to the question.

"No! let the secret die with me!" rung out, clear and firm, in Merle Monte's clarion tones; and, even in that awful moment, Brandt, the Buccaneer, was defied.

CHAPTER XXV.

BLACK DIAMOND'S FLAG.

WITH a curse at being defied, Brandt, the Buccaneer, threw the match into the sea, while he shouted:

"Lower that stubborn boy to the deck, and throw him into the hold with that black wretch, for I swear to yet wring from them the secret I would know!"

The men drew a sigh of relief, for, though most of them were accustomed to the most diabolical acts of cruelty, they cared not to see Merle Monte's life end as it was threatened that it should, for his immense nerve and unflinching courage had won their deepest admiration.

Down into the loathsome hold of the cutter Merle and Mezrak were taken, and ironed securely to the floor, while the Floating Feather went bounding on her way over waters she would now redder with her deeds.

To the surprise of Captain Brandt, some days after, the negro boy, Black Diamond, entered his cabin, his face in a grin, and bearing a large roll under his arm.

"Well, boy, what do you want?" asked Brandt, who had hardly noticed the boy since his coming on board.

He had been in a towering passion ever since he had been defied by Merle and Mezrak, and even Lieutenant Adolpho had not dared beard the lion in his den, so to speak, unless he found it absolutely necessary to do so.

"I wants ter see yer, sah, ter give yer a present," responded Black Diamond, still grinning.

"A present?"
"Yes, sah."

"What present can you give me, you black rascal?" angrily said the chief.

"It am a flag, sah."
"A flag?"

"Yes, sah, a flag fer de ship."

"Speak out, sir, and state what you mean." Black Diamond started as though he had been shot at, and stammered forth:

"Yer see, sah, massa cap'n, I has a leetle talent."

"You have a great deal of impudence."

"Yes, sah, so I has; but I has talent too."

"Talent to steal."

"Yes, sah, I kin do dat too, since you teached me," innocently said Black Diamond, and the look caused Brandt to burst out in a loud laugh.

"I glad you laff, massa, for den I knows I won't hab to cry," said the negro boy.

"Well, Black Diamond, you have gotten me into a good-humor."

"So I hab, sah, and I is mighty glad."

"Well, tell me what talents you possess, besides lying, stealing and pure cussedness?"

"I hab de talent, sah, of workin' with de needle, an' I has made you a flag out of some silk I stole from your cabin."

"Ah! let me see the flag," said Brandt, the Buccaneer, with an amused smile.

But he ceased to smile when Black Diamond unrolled for his inspection a large silk flag, beautifully embroidered.

It was a blue field, the center representing the wave crests of the sea, and upon them was floating a *red feather*.

Each side was embroidered alike, and with a skill few women could equal.

In the upper corner, next the halyards, was a gold-hilted dagger, with a red blade, and in the lower corner were a skull and cross-bones in white.

The other two corners had embroidered in them, the upper a hangman's noose in black, held in a small, delicately shaped hand of red, and the lower a chain and manacles in brown.

Most attentively did Brandt, the Buccaneer, examine the flag, and then he asked:

"Who did this, boy?"

"I did, sah."

"What?"

"Yes, sah; I did him, sure."

"I do not believe it."

"Yes, sah, for you knows I has the talent."

"It is indeed a talent; but what made you think of it?"

"You was good to take me wid you, sah, an' teach me how to steal an' cut throats, an' I wanted to make you present, so I hears you tell Mister Monte, de priz'ner, dat you hab named de craft de Floatin' Fedder, so I goes to work an' makes you dis flag."

"And a beautiful one it is, Black Diamond; but what does the dagger mean?"

"Dat you is after 'em hot."

"Ah, yes."

"The skull and cross-bones I understand; but tell me what the noose means?"

"Oh! dat am to hang us if we get cotched."

"True; but the chain and manacles?"

"Ter hold us fast."

"I see."

"You are a great artist with your needle, Black Diamond, and from to-day I make you my especial pet and waiter."

"Just tell Needles to look after the junior officers' mess, and you take care of the cabin."

"Thankee, sah; I'll do it sure."

"And, Black Diamond, ask Lieutenant Adolpho to call the men to quarters to salute our flag, for I shall run it up to the peak christened with a round from the guns."

Black Diamond departed in high glee, gave the orders of his captain, and ten minutes after stood by the side of the chief while the flag of the Floating Feather went up amid the roar of cannon and the cheers of the wild crew.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOUND AT LAST.

"CAP'N, I knows dat ilam."

"You know that island, Diamond?"

"Yas, sah, I knows him well."

"How does it happen, Diamond, that you, an American negro boy, know an island on the Mexican coast?"

"I done tolle yer, sah."

As the reader has doubtless surmised, the speakers were Brandt, the Buccaneer, and Black Diamond, his negro protege.

It was many months after the raising of Black Diamond's flag above the decks of the Floating Feather, and in that time the boy had served his master so faithfully that, in spite of his black face, the pirate chief had become deeply attached to him, the only attachment the man of crime held for a human being.

And in these months the Floating Feather had scoured the seas, winning a fearful name, and believed to be under the command of Merle Monte, while that unfortunate youth lay in irons beneath her decks, his only companion Mezrak, his faithful friend and devoted slave.

Again and again had Brandt, the Buccaneer, urged, pleaded and threatened Merle and Mezrak to divulge the secret they held; but they remained as firm as rock, although the irons cut deep into their flesh, and they were almost starved upon the scant food allowed them.

The Floating Feather, at the time when Black Diamond made known his knowledge of an island two leagues away, was cruising along the Mexican coast, her chief hoping against hope to find by accident the island of the hidden treasure.

"I'll tolle yer, sah, 'bout that island," said Black Diamond.

"Yer see, sah, I tolle yer I had a massa?"

"Yes, in America."

"Waal, cap'n, he war a great trabeler in ships, an' I went wid him, tho' I war a leetle boy then."

"You are not much more now."

"Oh, yas, sah, I is growin' fas', an' I'll soon be growed up."

"But massa he were a cruisin' in his yacht, which he loved to do, an' one day we land on that island."

"We didn't know dar was any folkses dar, but we foun' out dere was, for a great big black nigger, wuss a nigger dan I is, an' a putty young white feller come down arter us an' tolle us to go."

"Dey looked dangerous, an' so we went; but see, it are goin' to storm, cap'n."

Brandt, the Buccaneer, had turned deadly pale at the words of the negro boy; but seizing him by the shoulders he cried:

"When was this, Diamond?"

"Some few years ago, sah."

"And it was a negro and white boy?"

"Yas, sah."

"Anything like the two prisoners?"

"Yas, sah, somethin' like em; but dey was drest dif'rent."

"How were they dressed?"

"Dere pants were big an' baggy, an' made out o' silk, an' dey hed silk sashes wrapped around dere heads."

"Found! found at last!" almost shrieked the pirate chief.

"What had yer loss, cap'n?"

"An island, Diamond, and you have found it for me."

"But look again!"

"Yas, sah."

"Is that the island you saw the black and the white boy on?"

"It am, sah."

"You are sure?"

"Sartin."

"Look through my glass."

The boy obeyed, and said slowly:

"It am de island, for we lay near it for some days, an' I knows it, coz I run de yacht out in a gale."

"Then you can run this craft in?"

"Yas, sah."

"You shall do so, and we will make all sail to get there before the storm bursts upon us."

"Yas, sah, an' I'll git supper."

"I want no supper, boy, after the news you have given me; but I will drink, and drink deep."

"You seems so glad, sah, maybe de men want ter drink too?"

"They shall."

"Give them liquor from my stores, for the Treasure Island has been found at last."

"Better fetch de pris'ners on deck, sah, ter see us run in."

"You are right, Diamond, they shall witness my triumph."

And upon deck the emaciated forms of Merle Monte and Mezrak were brought, and finding it difficult to stand, the pirate chief ordered them lashed to the bulwarks abaft the wheel, which was at once done.

Then Black Diamond brought his chief a bottle of golden wine, with a tankard of gold to drink it from, and going forward, he spread flagons of liquor among the crew.

"Come, Diamond, the gale is increasing, and I want you at the helm if you think you can run in."

"I kin do it, sah, for I knows just the p'nt ter head for," was the confident reply of the negro boy, as he took his stand at the wheel, after placing on the deck numerous bottles of wine for his chief, whose appetite and capacity he well knew.

"If you are in doubt, Diamond, we can put about, ride out the storm, and to morrow run in."

"I hain't in no doubt, sah," answered Black Diamond, and so thoroughly had Brandt, the Buccaneer, come to trust the boy, that he felt no dread of the result.

With the negro at the wheel, his captain at his side, a bottle in one hand, while the other rested upon the bulwark, and behind him Merle Monte and Mezrak lashed to the oaken sides, while the crew were forward, growing more and more hilarious, the Floating Feather headed toward the island.

The night had come on, but the lightning, bursting from the inky clouds illuminated the way, and on bounded the vessel.

Suddenly a great lurch sent half the crew on their backs, and they failed to rise again.

Then another lurch, and more went down, while Brandt, the Buccaneer, grasped the mast and shrieked:

"Oh God! all is black before me.

"What does it mean?"

"It means," shouted Black Diamond in ringing tones, "that I am avenging myself on you, and your vile crew, Brandt Brentford, for you are all poisoned."

Brandt, the Buccaneer, could utter no cry, but gazed at the negro boy in horror.

"You think me a negro, do you, Brandt Brentford?"

"Know then that no African blood flows in my veins, for I am Belle Denham, the woman you so cruelly wronged, and at last I am avenged!"

Then came a burst of thunder, amid vivid flashes of lightning, and the cutter arose on a mighty wave and was dashed with a terrific shock upon a reef, while torrents of water dashed over, sweeping Brandt, the Buccaneer, and his pinioned crew into the wild waves.

But, lashed to the wheel and bulwarks, three persons were not washed off.

These three were Merle Monte, Mezrak and the woman Belle Denham, who, as Little Belt, Mr. Belden and Black Diamond, had tracked Brandt, the Buccaneer, to the bitter end, and brought destruction upon the Floating Feather and her crime-stained crew.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

The storm died away with the coming of dawn, the waves went down and the sea became placid as a lake; but the battered hulk of the Floating Feather lay upon the reef where a revengeful woman's hand had driven it.

Upon the white sands of the island were three persons, Belle Denham, Merle and his wife, and the youth said impressively, in answer to a remark of the woman:

"Yes, this is my island home, and here lies my treasure, so here shall I remain with good Mezrak, and if the world has no charm for

you, gladly will we welcome you, and here shall you abide also."

"Thank you, Merle Monte, and here let me abide, for I am sick of the world, and now that my red work is done, I will rest here in this peaceful island," she answered in a low, earnest tone.

And upon that barren Treasure Island, I will leave the strange trio—at least until Fate called them again upon the blue waters and to other lands, to carry out the destiny that shaped their ends, and beckoned them on through life from the cradle to the grave.

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